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# The New York Review of Science Fiction

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## Alexei and Cory Panshin A New Moral Order from *The World Beyond the Hill* (Part I)

In the most central stories of the early Campbellian Golden Age, two fundamental tenets were affirmed and reaffirmed. One of these was that change and difference are always possible. The other was that men armed with a knowledge of universal operating principles can always find a way to cope with any difficulty that change and difference may present.

These tenets were asserted in one important story after another by J. Sprague de Camp, Campbell's first ally, and Isaac Asimov, his most able student. And yet, brilliant as these stories were, nonetheless there was something about them that was distinctly—something of the special case, something untested.

The various novels that de Camp published in *Unknown* were only humorous fantasies, games of what if. They didn't make any claim to be serious. If *Last Darkness Fall* invoked the historical past, before the end of the story this was indicated to no longer be our own past, but rather some brand-new branch sprouting from the tree of time. And, at best, the Harold Shea stories, with their extension of scientific control to storybook worlds, might be taken as a kind of theoretical exercise in the application of universal operating principles, but no more than that.

Asimov's stories were more serious-minded science fiction, published in *Asimov's*. But "Nightfall" was the most special of the special cases, a laboratory experiment in cyclical history set off in some remote place in space and time with no direct connection to men of Earth and their history. And even though his series of robot stories was the most explicit presentation of universal operating principles to be found anywhere in Campbell's magazines, it was also true that the sphere of control that they established was only over a handful of man-created machines during the next fifty years or so.

Of all Campbell's writers, it was Robert Heinlein who applied the new beliefs where they were of greatest relevance—to the course of humanity's own future development, from the present moment to the human attainment of the stars. But even as he was doing this, Heinlein ran into a problem that he couldn't get past.

This difficulty didn't lie with the initial Golden Age tenet, the principle of change and difference. To Heinlein, it seemed clear that change not only might happen, but that it does happen, and that it will continue to happen. In his various futuristic stories written between 1939 and 1942, he imagined time-to-come as a kaleidoscopic whirl of permutation and combination, of change upon change upon change.

Heinlein's sticking point was with the second tenet—the presumption that men with a knowledge of the way the universe really works could contrive to cope with any difficulty they might encounter. Heinlein had been a relatively late convert to the doctrine of universal operating principles, and even though at his most confident he might envision a dedicated elite of competent men, the overseers of society, who could solve any problem that might present itself and contrive to ease ordinary folk past the rough spots, when he put his beliefs to the test, he wasn't able to maintain confidence. The truth was that shep-

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## In this issue

Alexei and Cory Panshin examine A. E. van Vogt's dreams for a new moral order  
Michael Swanwick looks at life, pain, and traffic lights  
Paul Preuss reveals secrets of the trade  
Responses from Marta Randall, Jack Williamson, James Gunn, and Brian Stableford to the continuing search for science fiction's lost younger generation  
Thomas E. Jackson looks at Soviet science fiction  
Plus the three "r's"—reviews, reading lists, and all the rest

## Michael Swanwick Three Short Fiction Reviews

Jan McDonald's "Unfinished Portrait of the King of Pain by Van Gogh" (*Empire Dreams*, Bantam Spectra) is, as the title suggests, about Vincent van Gogh. McDonald is an inventive writer, fast on his feet, and an able hand at plotting, but it's obvious enough from this story that he is first and foremost a slave to language, that his primary loyalty is to the words, words, words. Here's a taste:

Every other day he writes to his brother Theo in Paris. He asks for more yellow; *Send me more yellow*, and begs Theo to once again try and persuade Paul, implore Paul, go down on his knees and beg Paul, to come south to Arles to lead the artists' colony. Letter after letter after letter he writes, letter after letter after letter arrives, brought to him by his friend the postman Roulin (who he will paint someday soon, he thinks), letters saying *Not yet* and *In a little while* and *Patience, patience, my dear Vincent*. Vincent sits late, very late, too late, in the Café l'Alcazar, writing letter after letter after letter to his brother.

"Monsieur, we are closing, monsieur, you must go now, we are taking the tables in; monsieur, have you no homework to do?" say the waiters in their white aprons. . . . (pp. 116-117)

Nobody ever wrote like this save from love. Here and throughout, McDonald works a minor miracle: He writes in a wide-open and extravagant prose that suggests the bold, free and controlled strokes of van Gogh's paintings. When the painter comes upon "a field of ripe yellow corn, golden-yellow, sun-yellow bleached by a red earth track," with, looming over the field, "boiling black thunderheads, threateningly close, yet curiously suspended," we not only recognize but feel the painting.

There is in the Barnes Foundation, that eccentric legacy of the late eponymous collector (open to the public for just one morning a week and that only after a lawsuit forced the board of directors into it), a single small van Gogh. By terms of the founder's will it can neither be removed

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from the exact spot on the wall where he left it nor reproduced in any form, and thus is unfamiliar to any who have not seen it in person. From across the room it beckons: its colors so bright and strangely alien that to the contemporary eye it looks newer than anything being done today. Even van Gogh does not prepare for this. Shorn of familiarity, his art still shocking, inexplicable. One cannot help wondering: *What kind of man could have painted this? And knowing a little of his history: What part did madness play in its creation?*

Thankfully, McDonald does not try to slather on a science-fictional explanation for the man's genius. He presents the roots of the art as a kind of mystery. Van Gogh worships the sun, dreams of the sun, hears its voice deep within him, and this, the core of his art, is mercifully left unrationallized, unexplained, untrivialized. Instead, McDonald recognizes and taps into his power as a mythic figure, mad old Vincent, as compelling a solar myth as anything out of the Mabinogion or the Eddas.

The meat of the story is a series of confrontations between van Gogh and Jean-Michel Rey, the King of Pain. Rey, we learn, is an ordinary man who has been elevated to this godlike status by the High and Shining Ones, the evolved machine servants of a future humanity. He is Conscience and Judge, holder of vast powers, and sole dispenser of pain to humanity.

McDonald carries his influences openly and proudly. His "Visits to Remarkable Cities" owes much to Italo Calvino, for example, and to Jorge Luis Borges as well. Here, the debt is to Harlan Ellison, and specifically to Ellison's "Paingod," a servant to the Echos, who "dealt out the tears and the anguish and the soul-wrenching terror that blighted life from its first moment to its last." Both characters are placed in a morally ambiguous position, and both discover late in the game the relationship of pain to beauty. Consider also, this passage describing the High and Shining Ones: "But they carried within them the threat of ultimate sanction. If their decisions were ever questioned, even once, the machines would destroy themselves and plunge the world into everlasting agonized chaos" (p. 125). Now compare with the following description of Ellison's arbiter race from "Deathbird": "The litigants

were compelled to abide by the judgments, not merely because the decisions were always wise and creatively fair, but because the judges' race would, if its decisions were questioned as suspect, destroy itself."

The descent seems clear enough. But where Ellison endows his creations arbitrarily with their power and then, with a shrug and a who-ya-gonna-sue, kicks the plot machinery off the table and goes for the heart of the story, McDonald carefully presents a plausible motivation and rationalization for his unlikely ManGod. It works well enough. It makes sense in context. Most likely the story would not have made it onto last year's Nebula ballot without the science fictional explication. But Ellison did it better, and the King of Pain never really does come to life.

However, before the middle segments can drag the story to a halt, we return to Vincent, and a deftly skewed explanation of the later events of his life, including the famous incident of the severed ear, that yet does not falsify the painter's biography or personality. This displays a high standard of craftsmanship. There is, in fact, a crisp pocket biography of van Gogh here, though I couldn't guarantee its accuracy.

Am I supposed to be reassured or alarmed that the aspirant to "dethrone of God, deceit of Satan," as the old pun goes, is now mad old Vincent? I am not sure. It is, however, a nice image, the mad artist melting into the sun, and brings the story to a satisfactory close.

Imagery, in fact, is all. Had I the excuse, I could quote you... Oh, what the heck. Here's another chunk of the man's prose:

And then there are the days when the mistral blows from the north. It bows the trees to the ground before it and ruffles the cornfields like cat's fur and dries up Vincent's soul, sending him a little crazy so that he puts big rocks on the corners of his canvases to hold them to the ground. (p. 118)

Which is pretty nice, yes?

...

Phillip C. Jennings's "Messiah," (*Asimov's*, June 1988) contains

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Kathryn Cramer, Features Editor; L. W. Currey, Contributing Editor;

Samuel R. Delany, Contributing Editor; David G. Hartwell, Reviews Editor.

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Correction: In Issue #13, we neglected to credit the artwork and text on page 2, which was by Stu Shiffman.

*The New York Review of Science Fiction* regrets the omission.

enough plot in one short novel to fuel any three issues of *Analog*. This is not unusual for Jennings, who is one of our most intriguing, not to say maddening, new talents.

Jennings' main virtue is complexity. He's an endlessly inventive writer and his work is notched through with convincing minor detail. "Messiah" opens in a future China where the leaders sell proletarian bodies for Western currency. The hero, Jok, is taken to the Hegemony (basically a transformed America), stripped of his body and his "soul" recorded into a mechanical device. All this leads to the wonderfully funny line: "His second life Jok spent as a traffic signal, pleased to have outdoor work." Roughly one hundred years pass in quick order (societal changes shown from the viewpoint of a traffic light) and Jok is switched off, left inert and lifeless while the centuries pass. End of prologue. The story begins.

Cut to a world totally different from the old order but rising naturally from it. Young Hashbaz Troffit, a minor religious functionary traveling through a Balkanized North America in search of holy places, stops at the House of Souls, made entirely of microchip bricks, and yanks Jok from among thousands to bring back to life. They cross the Pacific on a gigantic catamaran with outriggers made from ancient submarines, to confront the continent-spanning (and still expanding) rockwork jungle. What profligacy of creation!

We shall pass lightly over the fact that Jennings chooses for his second viewpoint character an establishment religious figure, though the comic-yet-honest cleric is a recurrent motif in his work. There is hardly space here to begin to touch upon all that Jennings manages to cram into his short work.

Jennings' main vice is compression. He is so anxious not to waste the reader's attention that his stories must be read slowly and carefully in order to tease out the meaning. Here's a chunk from "Dr. Quick," (*Aboriginal SF*, Sept-Oct, 1988), one of his Bug Life stories ("Messiah" fits into this sequence):

In those days we had no Apparatus, just trial-and-error electronic surgeons willing to remove UNETAC bombs from prisoners' briefcases, and give them voluntary control over their sleep-wake cycles so they could take evasive action in an emergency. No more like *Grazia*! I faked my life timbre-lighting from bug to bug, bestowing the beginnings of freedom. How many weapons had UNETAC fished since then, to keep that freedom from becoming absolute?

And now this virus! After twelve footloose years I had no intention of getting infected. My bag of tricks had no input filters, so I went dead-ears, then contemplated the hours of subjective time before my arrival on Telesto.

Which is, granted, as tight and meaningful a synopsis of the situation one could hope for. Still, it's only on rereading or in retrospect that the story makes perfect sense.

Similarly, in "Messiah," the political combinations and recombinations of the Heegens, Cajamoors, 'Mbos, Eret, Kwi and so on can be impossible to follow. Though it's clear enough that Jennings has worked it all out in admirable detail.

This results in the one truly bizarre aspect of "Messiah," which is that though one remembers it as a novella, though it tells a story whose natural length is the novella, and though it flat-out ought to be a novella, it is not a novella. Jennings has managed to hold it down to novella length by the extreme measure of leaving out the central plot. Once Jok reaches the New China, convinced the weight of history is with him and prepared to act, the story cuts to Hashbaz Troffit fleeing the consequences, long years after, and his report to the Prophet, his religious superior. Tentative conclusions are drawn, the Prophet instructs Hashbaz to return Jok's chip to the House of Souls where it can be called up again in Jok, and we are done.

Everything dealing with Jok as Messiah, his plans, rise and failure and final ambiguous response, has been omitted for the sake of speed.

In story/er story by Jennings, we witness this same phenomenon of large segments of the plot thrown overboard to lighten the load, all in the service of pace. Obviously there is more going on here than a simple desire to be published. He is driven, it would seem, by demons the rest of us cannot see, much less understand.

Which is, in fact, what is most interesting about Jennings' work—that he is grappling with odd issues, aesthetic and philosophical, that he has yet to master within the short story format. His flaws are born of ambition, to what end we cannot quite make out. But there is a Power a-borning here, and once he gains control of his medium, we will be able to make out its nature.

Consider this your first quiet waking of premonition.

...

"Tiny Tango," by Judith Moffett (*Asimov's*, Feb 1989) is a disturbing work, and one I particularly wanted to like. It is not ingratiating. It does not seek to entertain. Yet while stories I liked better and read more recently have already been forgotten, "Tiny Tango" lingers on the mind. It haunts the imagination. It returns to the reader again and again.

And for good reason.

The narrator and hero of "Tiny Tango" is a woman trapped in a particularly nasty box. She has contracted AIDS, and her one chance for a normal lifespan is to exercise rigid control over the disease's "cofactors"—general health, lifestyle, and above all stress factors. In practical terms this means surrendering everything.

First of all it was necessary to divest myself of desire. The

yuppie dream I had only recently looked forward to with so much confidence—the dazzling two-career marriage and pair of brilliant children, the house in the suburbs, the cabin in the Poconos and the vacations in Europe—had become, item by item, as unavailable to me as a career in space exploration or ballet. Children, obviously, were out. So was marriage. So, it seemed, was sex in any form; sex had been my nemesis, scarcely discovered before it had blighted me forever. The prestigious high-pressure career in research, which my undergraduate record had made seem a reasonable ambition, had become anything but. I was not after all going to be one of those remarkable professional mothers, making history in the lab, putting in quality time with the kids every day, keeping the lines of communication with my husband open and clear at every level no matter what. I built up the picture of the life I had aspired to for my counselor and my group—and looked at it long and well—and said good-bye to it, as I believed, forever. All that was over. (p. 23)

We should pause here to look carefully at the actual writing. "Tiny Tango" is written in a tightly controlled grey flannel prose that launches no metaphors, avoids bright adjectives, turns no handsprings and makes no mistakes. It is the perfect voice for a protagonist who can herself afford neither mistakes nor handsprings—just idiosyncratic enough to avoid drawing attention to itself and no more, as fine a match of language to the story as could be imagined.

Moffett's protagonist leads a grey existence, without involvement or intimacy, even her support group—the only people who know her secret—all employ false names. Her attention is perforce directed inward. The occasional riots and the odd war are mentioned offhandedly when they impinge upon her quest for survival, and never again. The alien Hefn visit Earth, creating worldwide hysteria, and go away all in the course of a paragraph the weight of which is that they were of no help to the protagonist.

Decades pass while she maintains her stress levels and those members of her support group who lapse into emotion (and some who don't, for the technique confers only statistical benefit) die. Each year is bought with fanatical singleminded devotion to the cause of staying alive. She has gone to earth, buried in her organic and cautious research, with no friends, no interests, no personality.

When she has been reduced to all but a nullity, there is a strange eruption. She crafts a false penis from a rubber dildo and a medical prosthetic, and dressed in "undrag"—conservative men's clothing—begins making excursions to public restrooms, to watch the men at the urinals.

It was a mild day in early autumn. Lots of guys in shirtsleeves, with no bulky outer clothing to hinder the eager voyeur, came in and struck a pose at urinals near mine. For three hours I

stole furtive glances at exposed penises from within a disguise that no one appeared even to question, let alone see through. It was marvelous. (p. 39)

This is enormously sad and, more than that, chilling. It is the human spirk ground down to its irreducible nub.

Ultimately, the center cannot hold. A secret passion for an undergraduate she has hired to help her in her gardening, and a nuclear reactor meltdown, combine to undo her. In an act which is hard to read as anything other than ritual suicide, she rushes back to her contaminated home ostensibly to save Eric, her underground. When she arrives, of course, he has already fled. Ignoring the ambient radiation, she takes a bath and a nap, then seals her surrender with a feast of junk food:

I drank a can of Eric's Coke, my first in nearly thirty years. It was delicious. In a cabinet I found a bag of potato chips and ate them all with deliberate relish: exquisite! There were half a dozen boxes of baked beans in there—and pickled herring—and a box of cheese—Irrationally I began to feel terrific, as if the lost chance with Eric were somehow being made up for by his unintended gifts, the last meals I expected ever to eat. I meant to enjoy them, and I did. (pp. 59-60)

### **The Gift of Stones by Jim Grace**

New York: Scribner's, 1989; \$16.95 hc; 170 pp.

reviewed by Paul Preuss

Jim Grace is as self-consciously literate and recursive a writer as a postmodern reader could want—or else he wouldn't be yarning about fabulism and in the process giving away all the tricks of the trade. But so deft is his mastery that his written words ring in the ear; it is easy to imagine him sitting beside a fire strumming his lyre and reciting an epic poem.

*The Gift of Stones*, his second novel, is an embryonic epic from the twilight of the stone age. The voice that speaks from its pages is sometimes a man's but more often a woman's, who calls herself the daughter of that unnamed hero who invented this story-telling business for himself. While rehearsing her father's tale, she studies and refines his techniques and chips at the truth that lies within them, in a narrative scheme that brings to mind Robert Graves's "Homer's Daughter."

It seems that story-telling was an invention mothered by cruel necessity. The first gift of stone to a fey boy who lives in a village of flint-knappers is that of a fine, sharp, leaf-shaped blade, made by a village elder specifically for the purpose of severing the boy's arm. How did his arm come to need severing?

Move a little closer. Bend an ear . . .

That is, open to the novel's epigraph: "I asked my boys to search and sort the flints. . . . They had high hopes of finding implements, a broken arrow-head at least. All they found, in fact, was the skeletal lower arm of a child. . . ."

Unlike tedious thousands of epigraphs—those quotes which in the mind of the author have some poetic or philosophic relevance to the work, most of them looked up after the fact—this brief passage from the memoirs of a real English archaeologist, Sir Harry Penn Butler, seems to have been Jim Grace's inspiration. For as Butler continues, "We entertained ourselves that night, in the darkness of our tents, inventing reasons why the arm was there, and what had been the fate of the child's other bones."

Here are Grace's first fictional words: "My father's right arm ended not in a hand but, at the elbow, in a bony swelling. . . . He would invent tales to explain the injury. . . ." Not since "Call me Ishmael" has a novel had a more imperative opening.

We are evidently somewhere on England's coast about 12,000 years ago—but it could as well be the coast of neolithic Spain or Africa or Alaska or China. It is an age of specialization. On this seacoast are villages that mine and shape superb stone implements, letting food and

The price of life is death. Or possibly, the reward for facing death is life. I know all the platitudes and truisms both upbeat and cynical that normally close off this sort of story. They are not here. "I made an important choice at twenty-two," says the narrator-protagonist. "Because of that choice I'm alive right now, but I'm still wondering: was it a wise choice, given that the next twenty-five years turned out to be a kind of living death?" She concludes, "I still don't think I know."

Here is why this story returns again and again—because it raises serious questions, and treats them seriously. Midway through the work, it becomes clear that there is only one way the protagonist's struggle can end. At which point it would take a dull reader not to realize that there is only one way all our struggles can end.

So the question becomes: Knowing that we are going to die, how should we live? Which is, they tell us, what all literature is ultimately about: How to live. And yet, how rare to find a story that attempts exactly that!

There is much else that could be examined in this story. But it is all subordinate and in service of the central question. Whose answer, if any, is left as an exercise for the student. ▶

*Michael Sussman lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the author of In the Drift and Vacuum Flowers.*

other necessities of life come to them in trade. Further inland there are villages that farm and get what they need by selling their surplus. Roaming the land are men on horseback, armed with bows and knives, who would be all powerful but who must suffer the flint-knappers to live because without them there would be no weapons of quality.

There are men—or perhaps women, as our protagonist surmises—who sail the coasts in ships, never putting ashore unless they are forced to by storms or unless they choose to trade. They carry exotic objects as cargo. Bone flutes filled with perfume. Shiny malleable stuff, a reddish metal that, sometimes at least, if properly shaped, can bite as deep as stone.

On this coast there also live the widowed and orphaned, cut off from any tribe, who make do as they can. Our hero meets a pair of these castaways, a woman named Doe and her infant daughter and the amiable dog who watches over them.

From these simple materials, and from the natural stuff he finds along a strip of English coast, our narrator's father shapes his cutting tale as if he were shaping a flint, flake by flake, sometimes choosing a flake of truth, sometimes preferring the pleasing lie. As his daughter remarks, "The paradox is this—we do love lies. The truth is dull and half-asleep. But lies are spirited, nimble, alive. And lying is a craft."

The novella plays the same game. Jim Grace's raw material is a world intellectually understood, deeply felt, and closely observed: "One arm was not enough for keeping balance. He fell down and the sandprints that he made with hand and feet and knees winked and bubbled as they filled with sea . . . his tracks were lidless silver spheres which shrank and flattened as the wet sand at their edges collapsed to fill the holes."

If the core of Jim Grace's tale is archaeological truth, he shapes it with a pointed imagination and some experience of love, jealousy, charity, and revenge. In the end it is no happier than a 20th century tale is allowed to be, but it carries with it the hope that has always been the business of storytelling.

In this age when the choice at the bookstore too often lies between a sprawling yarn written in deaf prose or a fine description of trivia, a story told with lightness and precision about humans caught up in great events is a precious find. *The Gift of Stones* is a gift indeed. ▶

*Paul Preuss, author of Starfire, lives in San Francisco, California.*

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## Generational Saga

### Responses to Kathryn Cramer's article "The New Generation Gap"

*This is the third installment of responses and comments occasioned by Kathryn Cramer's statistical study published in issue #11 of The New York Review of Science Fiction. We particularly encourage writers under thirty to send us their dates of birth and the data concerning their first professional publications.*

#### ... And Statistics

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."

—Mark Twain

Kathryn Cramer's statistical break-out of the age of first sale in science fiction writers is interesting, yes, and informative, and gives one furiously to think. On its face, it seems to alert us to a (possibly) deplorable trend in the writership, editorship, and readership of the field—but it does not, I think, go far enough. These figures, representing only the age of first sale, by decade, within only one genre, are inconclusive, and, by themselves, can't really be correlated to anything except themselves. Let's not go off half-cocked here, folks. Let's suspend judgment until we figure out where, in the over-all picture, these figures put us. What we need here are more damned li—uh, statistics.

#1 For example: the study is limited to "well known" science fiction practitioners. But just how many writers make a first sale, and no others? As it stands, the figures really represent the age at first sale of (if you will) non-flash-in-the-pan science fiction practitioners.

#2 Further (and this one is probably impossible to get): what is the average age of people who send in stories, as opposed to those who get them accepted and published? Ah, if we could get our hands on this figure, we might discover, for example, that the average age of the slush-pile loser is ten years younger than the average age of the slush-pile victor—or that the average age of the would-be contributor has risen, or has lowered but the stories (one would have to assume) are worse. But also see #3 and #5, infra.

#3 How long had published science fiction practitioners been writing before their first sale and publication? How many had been submitting for how long before sweet acceptance was theirs? This may be part of #2, supra, but at least the figures should be easier to obtain.

#4 What was the average age of the science fiction editor during the periods of Cramer's study? That is, did we have a lot of young editors buying works from young writers, and do we now have a lot of older-but-wiser editors buying works from older-but-wiser writers? Surely editorial taste has a major effect on the content of that editor's magazine or line—let's check it out.

#5 Perhaps editors might be willing to provide figures on the number of such submissions they have received, over the years (if such figures are available). Are we looking, for example, at a situation where for every story published in the 1950s, 10 were submitted, and for every story published in the 1980s, 400 were submitted? (I remember reading a statistic to the effect that in (I believe) 1986, for every published book, there were 3000 unpublished scripts in that year alone. Yow.)

#6 It would be interesting to know the average age of the American population as a whole during the years of Cramer's study. Is there a correlation between various baby-booms and the first-publication age of writers?

#7 I note that age groupings in Cramer's study are broken out in decade increments. It might be very informative to find a correlation between societal dates and first-pub statistics—for example, was there a significant difference in first publication ages just after World War II, or Korea, or Vietnam? Did returning G.I.s flood the magazines with fiction? How about during the wars themselves? Did the (presumed) absence (presumably at war) of some published writers leave openings for more first-publication tries? 1966 to 1975, just for one example, included a lot of changes in society (the summer of love, the protests against and eventual withdrawal from Vietnam, the slide into apathy,

etc.). Is there any correlation here? Is it possible that during the late 60s and early 70s, too many people were busy doing sex'n'drugs'n'rock'n'roll to write about it? 1969 also saw the first moon landing (and predictions, if I remember right, that science fiction itself would soon be outdated). Did those events trigger greater numbers of new science fiction writers, or not? How about the Cold War (horror, yes (the slimy green Commies from outer space are coming!), but what about science fiction)?

#8 Another needed set of statistics is the number of active markets available to science fiction writers. I remember the dread days of the late 70s, when it seemed that every time you turned around, another anthology was begging for material (What Ever Happened to Baby Roger, anyway?). Publishing houses go through booms and busts in science fiction publishing—can we find a correlation here? And we all know the hideous truth that if there are only x number of publishing slots to be filled, they are more likely to be filled by well-known names than by neos (i.e., Publisher to Editor: "Let's not have too many unknowns on this list, okay? After all, we're trying to show a profit here.")

#9 And speaking of active markets—how about specific sales figures for books and magazines?

#10 Is it possible to correlate the average age of first publication to the total number of practitioners in the field? Ah, that might be very interesting, particularly if tied in with #8 and #9, supra: if a particular time-frame includes a large number of available markets and a relatively small number of professionals, we begin to work out an explanation for the number of first sales.

#11 What is the average age of the science fiction workshop attendee, for those years since such workshops have become common? What was the average age for science fiction fan club members? In my own experience, the age of workshop attendees has been going up (I think my last student under 21 was a good four years ago). Is this part of a trend, or is the population of California aging rapidly?

#12 How about the average age of science fiction readers. The hoary old line that the "golden age of science fiction is 12" may simply be untrue. Granted, it's going to be hard to gather statistics on the age of readers as opposed to fans (in my experience, it seems that a vast number of people read a lot of science fiction in their early teens, then dropped it entirely once they entered their 20s, and are therefore not available to be queried on their first-reader ages), but it may very well be that the "golden age" (that is to say, how old they are when we get our claws into them) hasn't been 12 in a long time (it certainly wasn't for me—I didn't start reading the stuff until I was 18).

#13 Speaking of which (and this one should be fairly easy to gather), how much juvenile science fiction was being published in each of the eras? Come to think of it, this may be more of a bear than it would appear—after all, how many of us repulsively bright young readers bothered to limit ourselves to stuff written for our age group? Still, the number of YA titles should give some clue here, if only of what publishers during any particular period thought a marketable age group to be. And, perhaps as important, when did the YA titles increase, and when did they decrease?

#14 What about the literacy rate in the country as a whole, for those decades of Cramer's study? I'm sure some branch of the U.S. Government is spending billions of dollars annually to keep track of this one, and the figures would either lay to rest, or bolster, fears that the population as a whole is going to the illiterate dogs.

#15 What about the literacy rate among what I now choose to call, delicately, Publishing Moguls? That is, Publishing Moguls as opposed to editors? How many P.M.s these days come from marketing instead of editing? How many read? How many can read?

#16 What about the rate of corporate take-overs of major publishing houses, correlated to the ages of neos? See #8 for a good reason why the multinational ownership of publishing houses might very well contribute to the higher first-sale age of science fiction writers.

#17 And, finally, what was the age of first sale in other genres, compared to that in science fiction? Seems to me that before we start

worrying about whether our readership is going to be limited to the (excuse the phrase) Yuppie age group, or whether we're alienating 12-year-olds, etc., we should at least figure out whether this supernunnnated-first-publication stuff is specific to our genre, or whether it is true across the board.

Listen, let's get a government grant and do this up right. I mean, this is interesting stuff, and meat for a lot of speculation (which is, after all, supposed to be our stock in trade), and bundles of arguments (the Science Fiction National Sport, as we all know), and panels at conventions for, oh, the next five or seven years. Let's go whole hog and get statistics on the average family income of a science fiction professional at time of first sale (Are all good young writers broke? Are they currently too broke to make the postage?) and correlate it to the inflation or recession rate. Let's break it down into blonde, brunette, and red-headed science fiction writers. Let's even—

But no. I get carried away. Never mind. 1 through 17 is enough.

—Marta Randall,  
Oakland, California



### "Hand Me Down My Walkin' Cane"

Gee, I hate graphs. Kathryn Cramer's "The New Generation Gap: A Study of SF Writers' Ages of Professional Entry into the Science Fiction Field for Six Decades of SF" (No. 11, July 1989) not only has a title that would choke a goat but is just crammed to the gills with charts, bar graphs, graphs and about a ton and a half of data. To what end? To show that the average age of "new" sf writers is much higher today than in the past. But what's the matter with that? Kathryn laments this increase in age, although we aren't told why. Is she implying that soon Hugo nominees won't be able to assemble for an awards ceremony for fear of tangling their walkers together?

Much of the science fiction of the Twenties and Thirties was highly formulaic, running to space opera and gadget sf. Readers were undiscriminating and editors, too often, undemanding of their writers. The stories of that time had to be exciting but did not have to have the degree of accuracy and sophistication dictated by today's more developed technology and better-educated readers. If a "spaceman" wished to walk around on the moon without a suit or oxygen, that was all right—then, in *that* story, the moon had an atmosphere. Who knew? So, yes, a fifteen-year-old could write and publish a story, and the magazines of that time served as a training ground for many a young writer. There were no workshops or classes for a budding sf writer.

When one compares the average sf story published in the Twenties and Thirties with other stories published in other genres at the time, they were wildly original and exciting. Kathryn holds up the shining examples of Andre Norton, Heinlein, Clarke and others, then laments the, now, lack of "young" talent. But she fails to take into consideration that these are the writers who have survived; many others fell by the wayside. One rarely hears of, for example, Richard Tooker, author of "Zenith Rand, Planet Vigilante" (*Mystery Adventure Magazine*, June and October, 1936). Norton, Clarke, et al grew in popularity because they did grow older. Their styles, techniques—their sophistication—developed. Tooker, alas, was left behind, and it's a good thing too. "Zenith Rand" had a plot so heavy and awkward you needed a bulldozer to get it moving, and swallowing the contrived dialogue and creaking coincidences was hard enough without the occasional "BLA-A-M!" sticking like a gob of phlegm in your throat.

Kathryn also states that "if the golden age of science fiction is still twelve, then there is a widening gap between the new readers of sf and the new writers." The gap is, perhaps, less than Kathryn imagines. Not only are children and young people starting to read sf at an earlier age, but they are also starting to write it earlier—only they are not being published in the professional magazines. Browsing through the children's and young adult sections of any public library will reveal not only a plethora of juvenile sf (when I was growing up, the only sf available was that written, supposedly, for adults), but will reveal as for even the youngest children. From my own experiences with my son, David, who is seven, I would contend that the "golden age" may be as young as six or seven. David started on sf at the age of three with such books as Jane Yolen's delightful "Commander Toad" series (chock full

of great and awful puns). When, at the ages of five and six, he began to write, many of his "stories" had a sf twist. His "professional" entry into the field came with me reading his efforts. Many writers today begin actually publishing at an early age.

Kathryn implies, by her limitation of new writers to "professional" magazines, that these writers spring full-grown into the field like Athena from the head of Zeus. Her study ignores the fact that the times have changed and ignores an area of publication that didn't exist to any great extent in 1926: the fanzine. Many of the so-called "new" writers have spent years honing their skills in workshops, entering contests, and publishing in the fanzines that seem to breed and die like lemmings. Look to the fanzines, or to the Clarion Workshops, the Writers of the Future Contest if you wish to spot the next young Heinlein or van Vogt. The times have changed.

This is not to say that the professional magazines do not encourage young writers, merely that the professional magazines are no longer training grounds for young writers. If a writer is published in a professional magazine today, it signals the fact that he or she has graduated from training. In the Twenties and Thirties, publication in the professional magazines signaled the entry into training of a young writer.

Forten years, as an editor at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, I waded through about 3-4,000 manuscripts a year, the majority by young writers. When I found a publishable manuscript, I was delighted. Even if a manuscript was not publishable, if the author showed a spark, I would write an encouraging note, hoping to nurture the flame. I cannot count the number of submissions I received that began, "I am a seventh-grader (Sophomore, Junior, etc.) and I have written a story . . ." The young writers are out there.

There is a very amusing book entitled *How to Lie With Statistics*; it points out that the selection of data and the stress given that data influence how one interprets it. I'm not saying that Kathryn is "lying" with her data, but I do suggest that the data selected for interpretation is no longer appropriate for the times, and presents a deceptive view of the sf world. Kathryn should expand her study. What is the average age of the new writers in fanzines? Of new writers attending Clarion Workshops? Entering the Writers of the Future Contest? The professional magazines, which were the training grounds for new writers in past decades, are no longer. Go to the training grounds and test and tell; don't look to the graduate schools.

But what's the matter with growing older anyway? Science fiction—as evidenced by R. A. Lafferty—has never had, I thought, an age limit; one is only limited by one's imagination. Pass me over my walker—I gotta get me to the Hugo's.

—Anne D. Jordan  
Mansfield Center, Connecticut



I was born 25 November 1926 and made my first professional sale in 1946, at 19 going on 20. (The story didn't see print till the following year.)

Ms. Cramer's article is interesting, but given the small numbers involved, couldn't those fluctuations in age at first science fiction sale be due to chance? It might be worthwhile to do similar studies of different kinds of writers for comparison.

If the upward trend in age is real, a possible explanation is that editors in earlier days were usually content when a story had a good idea, though the writing might be awkward. Now they want more polish—maybe in part because good, original ideas have grown scarce?—and it takes most writers time and practice to acquire literary technique. Are youngsters still submitting, though rarely selling? I'm not sure how one would go about finding that out.

—Poul Anderson,  
Orinda, California



I speak not as a published writer of sf, of course (though as someone whose first story dates to about age 8; first "novel" age 13—25 pages, about the Revolutionary War; not bad for 13, actually), but as someone who has been teaching literature and composition to college



freshmen since 1975, in schools from community colleges to private colleges, from public institutions like UCLA to small places like Millsaps (1400 students), from Ohio to California to Nebraska to Mississippi. And, as one of those "guilty" of assigning it with some regularity, I can vouch for the accuracy of Gene Wolfe's remarks that kids hate assigned reading, even if they decide after reading the book that they like it. A most disheartening attitude.

I seem to have missed Greg Benford's remarks, but he's right about the schools, but that is only part of the problem. Another big part (related in complicated ways to the school situation) is that kids do not read for pleasure any more, let alone write for pleasure. They do not read carefully because they do not know how, and too many of them have not been encouraged to do so; they watch TV or movies or rock videos or video games—mostly very passive kinds of interaction. They don't like having to work to get ideas, or at least to work in an unfamiliar medium, which literature seems to be for most of them. I'm convinced that many of them are fairly sophisticated watchers of film—that is, one time through a movie or TV show will yield up a fairly detailed reading for them. Part of the reason they read so badly and so reluctantly (I think, based on no statistical samples, just teacher's instinct) is that they try to read the way they watch TV/film: that is, they think once through quickly will give them the same grasp of a story as it would a movie—but they're wrong, because they do not know literary conventions as well as filmic ones.

—Kathleen L. Spencer  
Jackson, Mississippi

I think it's easy to understand why if writers are starting later, many of them these days: fewer markets for short fiction, and more competition for those fewer slots.

I assume most of those first sales of decades past were short stories. I'm quite positive that available short fiction markets per prospective writer has been at an all-time low this decade. Novelists tell me it's easier to sell a novel than a short piece, and there's no shortage of market opportunities there. But failed experiments cost less time at 4000 words than 80,000 words.

The short of markets are much tougher than they've ever been. I had this conversation with Gardner Dozois a few years ago. At 27, he told me, I was one of the few actually "young" young writers he knew of. He'd started publishing in his teens. "But then" he admitted, "I couldn't sell any of that junk today." Of course, by the time he was 27, Gardner was a better writer than I was at that age. He was just able to sell his apprentice work along the way. My contemporaries couldn't.

You also (as you know) have to keep in mind how long it takes to be published. Or even to make the sale. If a writer sells her story to *Amazing* after running it by *Omens*, *ISFEM*, *FGSF*, *Analogue*, *Full Spectrum* and *New Dimensions*, she could easily have spent more than a year just marketing it. (That doesn't even consider the late *Twilight Zone*.) I wrote my first story and first published story when I was 25. (I wrote [semi-professional] produced theater scripts before that. Do they count?) It underwent slight rewriting between submissions, but no more than an editor might ask for. I was lucky—it only took about a year to sell. Luckier yet—the editor was just completing the anthology ms., so it only took eight or nine months to appear in print. Is this a 21-25 sale, or a 26-30?

I'm not deeply worried that writers are publishing later, except that we may be losing a few to early discouragement. Mostly we're just missing seeing the apprentice work, and starting with the journeyman work. I know lots of young writers, whose work is better than 90 percent of an *Elwood* anthology or an issue of *Slender Stories of Teen Fiction*, just can't quite make the current cut. The ones who don't give up will be writing as well at 30 or 40 or 60 as their predecessors.

What worries me is that we're losing young readers to the visual media. Worries me a lot. Write about that—

—Martha Soukup  
Chicago, Illinois

It's true that most new science fiction writers are older today than

\*Then *Amazing* might take 20 months to publish it.

most of us were when I was breaking in, some sixty years ago. They are also sitting down to a very different game. We were still inventing science fiction then. Of course Poe and Verne and Wells had already laid out the rules and pioneered nearly everything, but most of what I knew about their work came from a few of their stories Hugo Gernsback reprinted in *Amazing*.

Born in 1908, I was twenty years old, with a grand total of six years in school and a few more of random reading at home, when my first story was published in 1928, back when science fiction was still "scientific." That may not have been quite typical, but most of us began young, often with little or no college. Frank R. Kelly had earned a contract to write for Gernsback by age sixteen; when he entered college at twenty-one, his career in the field "was basically over."

We learned to write from the science fiction pulps. Our critics were the readers who wrote letters for the back of the book, our teachers a few helpful editors, John Campbell the most notable. How much we knew or didn't know of actual science and general literature and even writing craftsmanship didn't really matter, not then.

What did matter was the vision of a magnificent human future best summed up as the "sense of wonder." We had all seen it. Campbell preached it. Science and technology, back in those more hopeful times before the bomb and pollution and the population explosion, were not yet so ominous as they have become. Science fiction was our wonderful window upon things to come, sometimes frightening, sometimes benign, all of them enchanting.

We were writing for a little group of readers like ourselves, sharers of the same dream, most of them as young and innocent as we were. The new ideas that seized us and dazzled them mattered more than craftsmanship. We learned our skills as we wrote. The old pros not captured by the dream were generally already too well paid to want to write for what we got and seldom very successful when they tried to learn.

Today's writer is getting into a very different profession. He no longer has to tell curious friends what science fiction is. Readers have changed as much as the writers. The market has grown vastly from Gernsback's solitary pulp, and the new readers range across a wide spectrum of taste and interest. For nearly everybody, that old vision had lost its pristine appeal. The ideas that enchanted us, such wonders then still to come as travel in space and nuclear power and thinking machines, are all familiar now, sadly worn and tarnished, no longer enough.

Really new and alluring ideas are now hard to find. The skillful writer can transmute the old ones into precious metal, but the newcomer who fails to recognize them too often tries to pass them off as virgin gold. Judging stories for the Writers of the Future contest, I often find adequate levels of writing skill undercut by poverty of invention.

I suspect that the new writer today is often entering the field because that's where the market is, not because his (or now often her) first love was science fiction. If he can hope to earn many times the half cent a word we began with, he must learn to hold his new and probably more sophisticated audience with something else than those lost spells of wonder.

If he finds science fiction already invented, he still must learn the rules. No longer a solitary pioneer, he has help waiting. He can find college courses on science fiction, books on how to write it, Clarion Conferences, but learning takes time. He is probably less likely than we were to get his early attempts into print.

Perhaps these observations may help answer some of Kathryn Cramer's question. The changes she has found are real enough, but I can see them as problems to be solved. I like to see science fiction as response to change. As the hard impacts of technology kept transforming our world, science fiction itself must change to keep the accelerating pace.

—Jack Williamson,  
Portales, New Mexico

In "The New Generation Gap," Kathryn Cramer and those she interviewed miss what seems to me to be a reasonable explanation for the dwindling numbers of teen-age sf writers: they're all in college. While no statistics fall readily to hand, the proportion of teen-agers

finishing high school and then going on to college is certainly higher than it was in, say, the year a 17-year-old Frederik Pohl was toting manuscripts to John Campbell (see the Fanshine's article in the same issue).

At the same time, writing *sf* is less obviously a viable career path now than it was even 15 or 20 years ago. There are fewer of magazines now than then, and they pay far less, after adjustments for inflation.

The market for novels is better, but the prospect of writing a book is orders of magnitude more daunting for a teen-ager, and the path to publication is less clear. (Do I need an agent? Who is the editor? Do I send the entire manuscript, or an outline?) And, of course, the economics of writing *sf* novels, for the beginning author, are dismal. Beginning advances are the same as they were in 1978, when I sold my first novel—far less, considering the march of inflation in that decade.

The economics, then, relegate writing *sf* to a hobby. Teen-agers, under increasing pressure to get into, and through, college, and then begin a career and start making some real money, may not have time for it.

—Mark J. McGarry  
St. Petersburg, Florida

I don't find it strange that the average age at which writers enter the science-fiction field has increased. I attribute that fact to the great increase in the number of science-fiction writers, the steadily rising level of writing ability, and the publication of the same number of magazines (about half a dozen) as have existed, except for a few ups and downs, since 1938.

When I first began writing seriously in 1948, I didn't know of any other writers of science fiction (even of fiction) in Kansas City, even when I served as SFWA liaison on the 1976 Worldcon committee. I don't know if there was another writer in the area (perhaps one or two); now there may be a dozen or more. I remember participating on a panel at a Kansas City convention three or four years ago in which half a dozen young writers were complaining about the number of rejection slips they were receiving and wondering what the problem was. "You," I said, "are the problem. There are many more writers and only the same number of magazines." One need only look at the more than tenfold increase in the membership of SFWA since its beginnings.

I realize that there are hundreds of books published, where once there were few or none, and some writers go directly into writing novels. But breaking into print as a novelist is difficult. Most writers have to develop their skills and their audiences and their reputations through writing short fiction.

Not only is the competition for a limited number of magazine pages ten or twenty times more intense than it was when I started, the writing is much more skillful. In my Writers Workshops in Science Fiction, the level or artistic ability is higher than it was in the magazines twenty years ago, not to mention forty, when I began, or fifty when Asimov and Heinlein got started. It is much more difficult to get published before the age of 20, as Asimov was.

I sold an article and a poem to *The Kansas City Star* when I was 23, and had a play presented (but got no money for it) by the University before I was 24. I was writing columns and feature articles for the campus newspaper when I was 19, but wasn't paid in anything but class credit for that, though in some situations I would have been. I sold my first story (the first story I wrote after I settled down to write one to sell) at the age of 24 to *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and was published at 25. It might have happened earlier, but I spent three years in the service. I met Sam Merwin, Jr., for the first time, at the World Convention in Anaheim, introduced myself and said he had bought my first story, which I was sure he didn't remember. He said, "No, but I know why I bought it. The level of writing in the slush pile was so low that anything written with any level of skill stood out immediately."

Well, I suspect that there is still a lot of unpublishable slush in the slush piles of today's magazines, but I also suspect that the average level of skillful writing is much higher and that hundreds of stories are rejected that once would have been published. That means that a writer must learn how to write: before being published; the older pattern of learning on the job is much less likely. And a writer must have enough experience of life, of himself or herself, and of his or her writing to arrive at something to say that is worth saying. And enough experience of

science fiction to recognize when that something is unique or derivative.

It used to be easier to know that. One became a writer forty years ago having read almost all the science fiction ever published. That is no longer possible. It may take longer to discover whether what you have to say is uniquely you, and that, ultimately, is the only thing worth writing.

Even so, I'm not quite sure I understand the precise nature of Kathryn Cramer's concern. The readership of science fiction *seems* to be aging, but this may be simply an artifact of the simplifying process. The readership of *Locus* is aging, but there are a vast number of young *sf* readers out there, as indicated by the book market for all sorts of material, including juveniles and film novelizations, and I would guess that the total readership is younger than it has been, or at least as young. Where once the high school or junior high school reader of *sf* was isolated and alone, I believe that today the majority read some *sf*. Coming into contact with fandom may be much more difficult, however, because of the very size of the readership.

Moreover, writers may enter the market later, but they have the opportunity to enter the full-time market sooner (when I entered the field you could count the full-time writers on the fingers of two hands, and they were struggling to make ends meet), and that is when the real learning experience occurs. There are personal disappointments in the inability to get published early, to be sure, even some tragedies when promising writers get discouraged and give up, but the field itself, I suspect, doesn't suffer; it may even be better off. The heightening of barriers ought to improve the quality of what gets over.

As for writing for 12 year olds, I would think that the age of the author has little to do with it. The great writers of juveniles have always been older. Verne was in his 30s when he began writing, as was Heinlein, and Heinlein was in his forties when he wrote his great juveniles. Asimov was in his 30s when he wrote his Lucky Starr books, and Madeleine L'Engle was 44 when *A Wrinkle in Time* was published. I suspect that young writers almost always write for their seniors and that it takes a number of years of experience to write, or at least to write well, for the young.

—James Gunn,  
Lawrence, Kansas

Looking back over Kathryn Cramer's article, I noticed two significant peaks in the older beginner graph lines: ten years after World War II and ten years after the Vietnam War. In my case, I was involved in the anti-war protest movement and the counter-culture. Another older beginner, Ray Aldridge, spent time in Vietnam as a weapons handler.

The post-Woodstock Generation seems to be reliably producing 20 to 28 year old beginners: Martha Soukup and John Betancourt, to name two. Us 1948 babies came of age in difficult times—I personally witnessed the last legally forced college integration in the South (and later voted for the man who'd been that student when he ran for mayor in Charlotte, N.C.). I suspect many writers of my generation went for the hot and punchy social action, writing for the mimeo magazines, rather than taking the time for longer, more reflective works. The world was burning now, then.

—Rebecca Ore  
Oriz, Virginia

There are, I think, a number of reasons why fewer writers are making a professional sale before 21 today than in my day (first professional sale in 1965, aged 16) not all of which are to be regretted, but it may be worth taking time out first to consider the implications of another remark in the article, to the effect that the average age of readers also seems to have risen significantly. This judgment is based on polls conducted by *Locus* and Davis Publications, which are biased in several different ways, mainly by virtue of the fact that they are samples which relate to specialized and non-representative enclaves of the *sf* audience—enclaves which have become even less representative in recent years because of the expansion of the *sf* audience. Even if we leave that aside, though, it is worth pointing out that a rise in the average age of readers is not the same thing as a rise in the average age at which people

start reading *sf*, which is the variable most likely to affect the age at which would be writers of *sf* begin to churn stuff out.

As *sf* has become gradually (at least a little) more respectable it is hardly surprising that a greater number of those who become addicted to it in their teens stick with it, so the average age of readers may well have risen; at the same time, though, *sf* has become rather more diverse in terms of its media and in terms of the targeting of narrow bands within the spectrum of readers. Thus, it is probably true today to a greater extent than ever before that the teenage new recruits are not reading (and/or watching) the same products as the older readers. This does have implications for the way that markets operate (especially the short story markets which are most significant for teenage writers) and also for the way in which the teenage writers are likely to write.

The degree of encouragement which the *sf* marketplace gives to teenage writers varies very considerably. The number of magazines fluctuates, and their character undergoes periodic changes; the spectrum of paperback publishing fluctuates even more wildly. When I started writing there were two monthly *sf* magazines in Britain, both of which had kindly and interested editors who wrote nice letters to ambitious kids and would make a real effort to find something publishable in what they sent in. Without that encouragement, it would have been very difficult for me to continue churning out short stories, and without some incentive to turn out longer and longer stories I might never have built the confidence to attempt a novel. When I did (in the spring of 1968, aged 19) I was again marvellously fortunate in that the Ace Doubles line was still going—but had mercifully been almost entirely abandoned by established writers, who had better-paying markets to aim at.

Had I been born ten years later the soft paperback market would not have been there, but the magazine market would have been even softer; had I been born ten years later, there would not have been a plausible market in sight, and when I consider objectively the quality of my early works, I am convinced that had I been born in the late 50s I would not have stood a cat in hell's chance of selling a single word before I was 21—or, quite possibly, 31 (which, when you consider that I actually managed to publish a million words of *sf* before I was 30, would have made a considerable difference to the shape of my career—it would be interesting to see Kathryn's figures extended to show how rapidly the careers of writers who began at different ages actually became established, in terms of volume sales).

Given these changes in the marketplace—especially in the fact that the short story markets have moved gradually upmarket to cater to older readers—it is not surprising that Kathryn's figures for the "1976-85 era" show an old average entry-date for writers. It seems to me, though, that certain recent changes in the marketplace may have had an opposite effect in the "1986-95" era. Short-story markets in Britain have opened up considerably in the recent past, with *Interzone* going bi-monthly and *The Gate* arriving in the marketplace; in the U.S. beginning writers seem to be receiving considerable encouragement from the annual *Writers of the Future* contest. The fact that Waldenbooks and B. Dalton will display books for shorter periods of time may devastate the midlist, but will encourage more prolific publication of actual titles as publishers compete to fill up the time-restricted rack space. It may soon be boom-time again for the vaguely promising novice whose books would be rejected in leaner times (which is what teenage writers almost invariably are).

The good thing about the expansion and diversification of the *sf* marketplace is that *sf* writers have a more open choice of whether to aim their books at teenagers or mature readers. In answer to one of Kathryn's questions, of course (some) *sf* writers should be trying to write (sometimes) for younger readers; equally of course some of them, some of the time, should be writing for the most sophisticated readers around. The idea that the shifts in her percentages signify the opening up of a "generation gap" between writers and readers is an artifact of over-generalization; it has probably always been the case that the best writing for teenagers is done by much older and more skillful writers, while older readers are more likely than younger ones to be able to appreciate the naive charm and *esprit* of precocious brat-writers.

There is no problem to be solved, and no need at all for quasi-apocalyptic pronouncement.

—Brian Stableford,  
Reading, England

My date of birth is 3/11/21. I read my first *sf* story (as distinct from fantasy which was plentiful in children's books) at age 9. As a kid I always had a number of active interests, moving between one and others as whim struck, and writing was one of these.

Probably, I started scorns of stories during my childhood and teen years, setting out with a strong simplistic title and melodramatic opening of the gripping *situation* which caught my fancy, then bogging down on the second or third page with absolutely no idea of where to take it. All this, you understand, recurrently, between bouts of absorption in airplanes, cars, electrical and/or mechanical gimmicks of all kinds (in that Bantam bio, I'm not kidding about the hang glider), various school-related activities, squirrel hunting, biking (pedal variety), general hanging around with friends, and townwise, of course, girls. But every now and then, writing itched me and I scratched.

My college career was interrupted twice by the Army, and it wasn't until 1947, when I was done with the lot of them, that I submitted a piece of *sf* writing—to John Campbell; who else? It was pretty awful; he returned it without comment, and for a number of years I got wound up in other activities. Still reading the stuff regularly, but the writing urge went on hold.

In the winter of 1956-57 I went on a brief writing spurge, completed five stories and sent four of them around for a total of 18 rejection slips and one sale: to Doc Lowndes who published "A Gun for Grandfather" in *Future SF* for Fall, 1957. The trouble was, I had literally no idea what made "Gun..." a saleable story and the others not. (Oh, yes; I was 36 at the time.)

Well, I'd proved I could do it; right? But it was a lot of effort, evenings when pooped from a hectic day's work; much easier to write fanstuff directly on stencil. Between '57 and '71 I sent only one story to one editor, and being at the time totally incapable of revising, I blew the sale.

With early retirement in 1970 the writing urge came back; I revised and sold (in 1971, age 50) the above-mentioned story, then several others, in '72 a first book, etc., etc. The Clarion West *SF* Workshops at the Univ. of Wash. in '71 and '72 pointed out many of my chronic mistakes and probably gave me a boost equivalent to five (ten?) years' experience.

General comment: fifty years ago there weren't many people writing *sf*; the competition wasn't so heavy. Nowadays it may not be that teenagers aren't writing, but that with 800(?) members in *SFWA*, there's simply not much room for inexperienced writers in a limited market. So they appear in fanzines and semi-prozines that do print less-than-pro fiction. But my bet is, any editor's mail will confirm that they're still writing, and submitting.

—F. M. Busby,  
Seattle, Washington

Herewith some statistics...

Birth date: 20 April 1943

First professional sale of fiction: "Roof Garden Under Saturn" in *New Worlds SF* no. 195 (November, 1969), sold a few months previously.

First sale as such (non-fiction): "The Cochineal Cactus" in *Amateur Gardening*, approx 1957.

At approximately age 14, I sold four articles on growing cacti and succulents while at school, but this is a bit anomalous, eh?

Will *sf* become a literature by 35-year-olds for 35-year-olds? I don't know whether you've seen my essay "The World Renews Itself" in *Nebula Awards* 23, but I kick off by suggesting that, in tandem with *sf* attempting to answer Big Cosmic Questions (and inevitably being dwarfed by the universe, made to seem childish) there's a process of juvenalization at work, epitomized by Fred Pohl's *Animals of the Heechee*, where, as the threat in the novel tends to the infinite, so do its characters become more kiddish. The original scary adult mystery has now been onion-peeled to a point where human child and anthropomorphized Heechee child are at school together and about to become the focus of the whole cosmos. The awesome alien is now a school kid.

And then this year *Falling Free* wins the Nebula, an out-and-out

\*life experience.

juvenile. Engaging, sprightly, buoyant, oh yes. But in its whole spirit it's a juvenile. Extrapolating these trends, you might well decide there wasn't any problem for sf authors, whatever their age, keying in to the consciousness of twelve-year-old readers.

What particular groundswell in the collective brain of SFWA caused *Falling Free* to be given the laurels as brightest and best? An unconscious fear of losing touch with the twelve-year-old roots? Applause for Ms. Bujold in keeping the faith with those roots? For which she shouldn't be dealt any brickbats. But this award is rather symptomatic.

Actually, given the juvenilization process, the really interesting question might be to what extent in future "mature, adult" sf authors might be able to write "mature, adult" sf books at all.

The chronological age doesn't matter. The narrowing mental age gap does matter, and might herald the demise of the sf field's maturity.\*

—Jan Watson

Northants, England

I was born June 17th, 1949. First short of sale ("Empire of the Sun") in 1969, aged 19, to Harlan Ellison's *Again Dangerous Visions* (appeared, I think, in 1972). But this proved to be flukish, since I didn't make my second sale ("The Deed") until 1975, to *PSF* (appeared 1978). First novel (*Station Gehenna*) sold 1986, published 1987.

Sure, there are higher standards today, along with greater competition from other media. But in searching for the missing young writers, I would first want to look at the demographics. Are there really any fewer aspiring sf writers per 100,000 kids in the 15-19 age group? Or are there just fewer kids?

—Andrew Weiner

Toronto, Ontario

I am reacting to Pamela Sargent's response to your generation gap article. Her criticisms of writers' workshops caused me to sit down and actually scribble out a few comments.

I sold my first two stories during my 27th year and have recently turned 28. I hope to see these pieces in print before I turn 29. It seems unlikely that I'll have a novel in print before I pass 30. When I was 21 I was sure I'd have sold a novel by 22. A lot happened since then.

One of the things that happened was that I got involved in a writers' group and wound up attending Clarion. Sargent points to workshops as part of the problem in the sf generation gap—possibly something that helps ruin young writers. As if aspiring writers run to workshops right off, thinking that they will magically turn them into professional writers, giving themselves over to some kind of group mentality. I would argue that most of these workshopers start by trying to become writers all by themselves in the traditional pattern for artists. They bash their egos against the wall of rejections and seeming indifference for five or ten years. Then comes a point at which they either wind up putting their dreams on the back burner or they find some kind of support to keep going. My experience has been that workshop members' average age is about 30, mostly people who've been trying to write for a long time.

My own experience was years of printed rejections, never getting a sign that a human being had looked at my work. (I never received encouraging letters from editors before sending them publishable stories.) There was no outward sign to tell me that I was improving. I didn't know any other writers. I lived in an attic, on a farm and in an unfinished house, writing full time. Finally I began to consider getting realistic—time to get a real career, put the writing aside, at least for a few years. Instead I fell in with a workshop and found myself continuing to take my work seriously. Now I actually had human beings responding to my stories. I had actual encouragement to keep trying. And at Clarion there were established writers who looked at my work and told me they could see improvement. It doesn't really matter if the pros and the workshopers knew what they were talking about; they allowed me to dedicate myself to writing and I worked harder than ever before. Less

\*Other factors include censorship pressures to avoid naughty themes.

than two years after the point at which I was going to put writing aside I sold my first story. Every good writer creates himself, but most of us (good or bad) can only go on writing into a complete void for so long. It makes a lot of sense for aspiring writers to give each other an audience.

One likes to think as a new writer, that it has gotten harder to break in. But I don't know if that is true. But I do think that short story markets such as *Asimov's* and *PSF* favor "mature" storytelling with mature conceits and perspectives that may go unnoticed by the younger writer in the excitement of just getting his/her neat ideas down on paper. The novel and trilogy market might have a lot more room for immaturity but there's already hundreds of competent professionals to compete with. And writing several book length manuscripts before you get lucky or good also takes a level of maturity. In a crowded field, with editors under too much pressure to have the time to encourage rough, unknown authors, only those who spend a lot of time knocking on the door are going to get in.

—Damian Kilby

Killingworth, Connecticut

Kathryn Cramer's article on generation gaps is certainly interesting. My first feeling is that many readers will detect in her findings *The Writing on the Wall*, since finding Writing on Walls is such a luxurious and endemic habit in the field. Well, perhaps it all signifies that these days you have to know so much more to write sf, and therefore more years naturally have to flow by before you can make a start; on the other hand, perhaps it signifies that all those youngsters are playing out on their PCs the fantasies we used to write down. Or maybe it all signifies nothing. There must be something in the universe that signifies nothing.

All right. First I'll answer the easy bits of your letter, the personal rather than the abstract.

According to the bibliography which Borgo Press has been promising to publish for I know not how long, my first professional sale was a short story called "A Book in Time," published in the trade journal *The Bookseller* in its 3rd February issue, 1954. I'd had a story, "I," accepted by *Nebula* before that, which did not get paid for or published until later.

However, I also have to tell you that I was always a storyteller. I told elaborate serial stories at one of my schools, and was notorious for the dirty and violent short stories I wrote for other people—for which I was paid a penny a read, at least in theory and sometimes in practice.

That would be in 1942-43, when I was seventeen or so. I was born on Tuesday 18th August, 1925. Nothing else ever happened on that date, except that old Emperor Franz Josef died. Alan Robbe-Grillet was born on the same day, three years earlier.

Undoubtedly, I would have started publishing before I was almost thirty, were it not for the war. That hiccup is reflected in Cramer's graph. The 26-30 group is shown steadily on the increase from stage one, but there is nevertheless quite a leap between the 36-45 entry and the 45-55 entry, after which that column subsides. That narrow grey mottled column stands as a memorial to those who fought (for democracy and all the usual things)—and in consequence found their careers warped for good. Or bad, of course.

As to today's youngsters—I have no solid theories on that, except to point to the fact that there is so much more choice now in every field than there was, including the cultural. And so much more color. We were once drawn ineluctably to the covers of *Martian* and *Thrilling Wonder* (okay, I was), because they were so colorful and bizarre. Now the colorful and bizarre are everywhere. (I don't care much for them now they're loose on the population; I really loved them when they were confined to the magazines.) There are just more places for youngsters to go in the eighties.

—Brian Aldiss,

Oxford, England

Although this concludes the amassed responses to Kathryn Cramer's article "The New Generation Gap," we encourage writers to continue to provide their statistics in order that Kathryn Cramer may incorporate them into her survey.

## A New Moral Order

Continued from page 1

herding mankind from the present to the stars looked like no easy task to him.

He had little trust in the willingness and ability of normal less-than-competent humanity to do the right thing. He could wonder whether the capable, responsible few could manage to raise stupid, greedy, unseeing humanity up to the stars without snapping under the strain. But what really haunted Heinlein was the possibility that when mankind did reach the stars, it would find beings more able and advanced already established there.

In a universe responsive to competence, these aliens might effortlessly outstrip the most brilliant human genius, even Andy Libby of *Methuselah's Children*. They could be more adept manipulators of universal operating principles—like the rapport groups of the Little People who by the power of thought alone can convince plants to bear fruit that tastes like mashed potatoes and gravy. Or, like the gods of the Jockaira, they might just be so highly evolved that try as men could it would never be possible for them to catch up.

It is this spectre that causes Heinlein's long-lived people in *Methuselah's Children* to turn back from the stars and retreat to Earth. Heinlein's Best of the Breed are motivated and sustained by the confident knowledge of their own superiority. Without this assurance, they despair of life, wit, go mad and die.

Until World War I finally intervened, and he went off to serve his country at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, Heinlein went round and round with this problem in one story after another. But he never came close to resolving it.

Heinlein's limitation was his lingering attachment to Techno Age notions of survival of the fittest and evolutionary superiority. These caused him to look upon transcendent aliens if not as hostile, certainly as dismaying. To someone who craved to have the edge, to know all the answers, and to be in charge as badly as he, the imagined indifference of higher beings could seem shattering—as he indicated in *Methuselah's Children*, "By His Bootstraps," and "Goldfish Bowl."

There was another writer for *Amazing*, however who would tackle the thorny questions of fitness, evolution and the future development of man and deal with them more creatively than Heinlein had been able to do. This was A. E. van Vogt, the most radical and visionary of all Campbell's authors.

Alfred Elton van Vogt was born on his grandparents' farm in Manitoba, Canada on April 26, 1912. At this time, van Vogt's father and three of his uncles were partners in a general store in the village of Neville, Saskatchewan and his father was studying by correspondence to earn a law degree.

Like Isaac Asimov, who developed a case of double pneumonia at the end of his second year from which it was feared he wouldn't recover, van Vogt had an early brush with death. When he was two, he fell from a second-floor window onto a wooden sidewalk, knocked himself unconscious, and remained in a coma for three days.

Van Vogt was like Asimov in another regard—the original language of this writer-to-be was not English. Until his mother put her foot down on the matter when he was four, it was a dialect of Dutch that was spoken in the van Vogt household.

Young Alfred had something of a divided nature. He was an insatiable reader who for many years devoured two books a day and knew early that he wanted to be a writer when he grew up. But there were also moments when he was "an extrovert of extra-ordinary energy"—as he put it in a 1981 memoir entitled "My Life Was My Best Science Fiction Story."

Van Vogt was a horseback rider as a youth. In summers during his teens, he worked as a separator man on a threshing outfit and drove a truck for a combine. He was a good rifle shot, and even came close to going off on a trapping expedition to northern Canada.

In later years, van Vogt would look back upon his younger self and try to determine just when it was that the more outgoing part of himself had gotten suppressed. Did it stem from that traumatic fight with another boy that occurred when he was eight? Was it the teacher who had caused him to doubt himself for reading fairytales at twelve? Or was the crucial event when he was 17 1/2 and killed a snake, and then 12 The New York Review of Science Fiction

suffered a revulsion against doing harm to any wild creature?

Though van Vogt might make guess after guess, he would never be able to pinpoint the exact moment when it happened. And, in fact, even well into his twenties, when he was an advertising space salesman and writer of interviews for a string of trade papers, van Vogt could still call on some lingering residue of brashness in his character to gain the attention of businessmen and store owners—as long as no one challenged him.

The truth of the matter seems to be that van Vogt's withdrawal into himself took place over a considerable period of time. The beginning of it may lie in the fact that young Alfred was a highly idealistic small town boy with a number of wide-eyed notions about right and truth and justice in his head. When the world failed to conform to his expectations, he found that a substantial shock.

Beyond this, it was also true that Alfred was a boy who had something a little strange and left-footed about him. He didn't think or talk exactly like everyone else, and reaction to this may have had its effect on his developing personality.

As the Twenties boomed, van Vogt's lawyer father moved his family once and then again, first to the larger town of Morden, Manitoba, and then to the city of Winnipeg, where he became the western Canadian agent of the Holland-American Shipping Lines.

These moves were very difficult for van Vogt. He would recall: "Childhood was a terrible period for me. I was like a ship without anchor being swept along through darkness in a storm. Again and again I sought shelter, only to be forced out of it by something new."

Morden was twice as large as Neville. It was a conservative community with a predominantly English population, and here van Vogt was made aware that Canada was British but that he was not.

Winnipeg was even more trying. It was a city of 250,000—two hundred times the size of Morden—and Alfred felt lost there. He quickly fell behind in school "in the five subjects that you just can't catch up on easily algebra, geometry, Latin grammar, Latin literature, and one other that I can't recall." In consequence, he was asked to repeat the twelfth grade.

The broader horizons offered by science fiction—still not yet called this—were one answer he found to his difficulties. He came across SF first in Morden at the age of eleven in a British boy's magazine called *Chums*, the yearly collected volume of which he contrived to borrow for a dime from another boy who soon became his first friend.

Then, in Winnipeg, in his dark days of failure in school, he discovered the November 1926 issue of *Amazing Stories* on a newsstand and recognized it as what he was seeking. During the next three years—until Hugo Gernsback lost control of the magazine and it came under the more conservative editorial direction of ancient T. O'Connor Sloane—van Vogt would read *Amazing* assiduously, seeking signs of another and higher order of being than that which was to be found in Winnipeg, Manitoba in the late 1920s. As van Vogt would eventually come to express it:

Reading science fiction lifted me out of the do-be-and-have world and gave me glimpses backward and forward into the time and space distances of the universe. I may live only three seconds (so to speak) but I have had the pleasure and excitement of contemplating the beginning and end of existence. Short of being immortal physically, I have vicariously experienced just about everything that man can conceive will happen by reading science fiction.

If *Amazing* had defects and limitations, this wasn't apparent to young Alfred. What he saw in the pioneer magazine of science fiction was the wonders of man's progress to come, and his imagination was fired by one grand concept after another: ESP; trans-light speeds; exploration of space; the infinitely small turning out to be another universe; new super-energy sources; instant education; the long journey; shape changing; vision at a distance; time travel; gravity manipulation; taking over the body; etc."

A considerable impression would be made on van Vogt by E. E. Smith's *The Skylark of Space*, of course. But the writer in *Amazing* who had the most to say to him was A. Merrit.

When Gernsback left the magazine, the youngster couldn't help

but notice the change. Amazing lost the magic it had held for him and became dull. Consequently, in 1930, in one of the utterly abrupt transitions that were to become typical of his conduct of life, van Vogt put science fiction aside.

He wouldn't look at SF again for more than eight years, until, just as abruptly, he was ready to begin to write it. In the meantime, however, he had a great deal of self-preparation to do.

Lack of spare cash was one reason for his ceasing to buy science fiction magazines. The stock market crash of 1929 took place at the beginning of van Vogt's first year in high school. Before that school year was over, van Vogt's father had lost his shipping-lines job and it was apparent there wouldn't be sufficient money available for Alfred to go to college. Although in later life, van Vogt would sit in on college courses in many subjects from economics to acting, this was to be the end of his formal education.

For the next six months, he hid out in his bedroom and wondered what to do with himself. Mostly he continued to read. He read hot pulp fiction—historical romances, mysteries and Westerns. He read serious turn-of-the-century British fiction and Nineteenth Century French novels. He read history and psychology. And he also read books of science.

The science that interested van Vogt the most was not familiar Newtonian science. It seems possible that the unrecalibratable essential subject he flunked in tenth grade, along with Latin and math, just might have been chemistry or physics. Unlike a John Campbell or a Robert Heinlein, van Vogt hadn't spent his youth building radios or carrying out a search for a better way to blow up the basement. There was never much likelihood that he would grow up to become an aeronautical engineer like de Camp or a biochemist like Asimov.

The science that van Vogt did care about was the new wider science of atoms and galaxies. But even here, what interested him was not the details, but rather concepts and overviews—the philosophy and meaning of science. And so it was only natural that he would find his way to the writings of Arthur Eddington, James Jeans and J. B. S. Haldane.

However, the book that had the greatest influence on the formation of his thinking may have been Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1925). At one time or another, this pioneering work of post-materialistic philosophy passed through the hands of most of the youngsters who would grow up to become the science fiction writers of Campbell's Golden Age. But it was van Vogt alone amongst them who would be able to take insights derived from this difficult little book and make them the basis for his SF writing.

Until the year preceding the publication of *Science and the Modern World*, Alfred North Whitehead's career had been spent as a mathematician, first for twenty-five years at Trinity College, Cambridge, and then, from 1911, at the University of London. We might recall Whitehead in his role as Bertrand Russell's collaborator on the *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13), a heroic three-volume attempt to reduce all mathematics to logic. Some thirty years after it was published, Pratt and de Camp would draw upon the opening pages of this work for the symbolic equations which Harold Shea employs to transfer himself from one reality to another.

We might also remember that in his brilliant 1951 metamathematical paper, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions," the German Kurt Gödel had demonstrated that it was impossible for either the *Principia Mathematica* or any like system to be self-consistent and complete. Certain statements must necessarily be admitted as true that the system itself was incapable of either proving or disproving.

Even before the publication of Gödel's paper, however, Alfred North Whitehead himself had already come to perceive the inadequacy of his and Russell's monumental effort. In fact, Whitehead had been led by his understanding of mathematics, of the new quantum physics, and of physiology and psychology to doubt the sufficiency of the entire modern scientific philosophy.

He would object: "We are content with superficial orderings from diverse arbitrary starting points." And, with disarming gentleness, he would further inquire: "Is it not possible that the standardized concepts of science are only valid within narrow limitations, perhaps too narrow for science itself?"

So it was that in 1924, at the advanced age of 63, Whitehead

traveled across the Atlantic to join the faculty of Harvard University as a professor of philosophy. And the first fruit of this new career was *Science and the Modern World*, based in the main on eight Lowell Lectures that he delivered in 1925.

Two complementary lines of argument were to be found intertwined in his remarkable book. In one, Whitehead reviewed the entire history of Western objection and exception to scientific materialism: The philosophical arguments that had been raised against it at the outset of the modern Western scientific adventure, during the Age of Reason. The experimental objections—often phrased in poetic terms—of the Romantic Era. And finally, the problems that had been recently raised for scientific materialism by the strange new science of the later Age of Technology.

And meanwhile, in his other, concurrent line of argument, Whitehead sketched out a basis for an alternative post-materialistic philosophy—"a system of thought basing nature upon the concept of organism and not upon the concept of matter."

As Whitehead would draw the distinction:

The materialistic starting point is from independently existing substances, matter and mind. The matter suffers modifications of its external relations of locomotion, and the mind suffers modifications of its contemplated objects. There are, in this materialistic theory, two sorts of independent substances, each qualified by their appropriate passions.

The organic starting point is from the analysis of process at the realization of events disposed in an interlocked community. The event is the unit of things real.

Following the arguments that Whitehead was setting forth in *Science and the Modern World* was not at all easy. His presentation was intricate, wide-ranging, dense and elusive, as though Whitehead himself wasn't always completely sure just what it was he was attempting to say.

In the course of his discussion, Whitehead would draw a contrast between thinkers who are clear, yet limited, and thinkers who are muddled, but fruitful. Beyond question, he himself was a thinker of the second sort. In consequence, following out the nuances and implications of Alfred North Whitehead's arguments and attempting to determine exactly what they meant would remain something of a challenge even for professional students of philosophy.

It was little wonder, then, that van Vogt's contemporaries—the other boys who would grow up to write the science fiction of the Golden Age—should largely find *Science and the Modern World* unintelligible. Or that in the places where these earnest young scientists of the basement could comprehend Whitehead—as in his repudiation of scientific materialism—they would not be prepared to accept and follow him.

However, it would be quite otherwise with van Vogt, in large part precisely because he was not a professional student of philosophy, and neither did he have any special allegiance to the given assumptions of Western science. He was just an out-of-step kid from farther Canada who above all things desired to broaden his mental horizons and was ready to take his ideas wherever he could find them.

For van Vogt, reading *Science and the Modern World* provided him with exactly what he was seeking. From out of the general murk of Whitehead's argumentation, certain key remarks leaped forth to speak directly to him.

As one example, there was this:

My theory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world.

What a mind-boggling suggestion this was—that everything is everywhere at all times, so that each and every standpoint to some extent mirrors all that exists! Now that was food for thought.

So was this:

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"If organisms are to survive, they must work together. Any physical object which by its influences deteriorates its environment commits suicide."

And this:

"Successful organisms modify their environment. Those organisms are successful which modify their environments so as to assist each other."

It mattered little to van Vogt that he might not be picking up every last detail of Whitehead's reasoning. What did matter was that he grasped the whole: in place of a universe of constantly competing particles effectively going nowhere, Whitehead was offering the alternative vision of an organic and interconnected universe evolving through creativeness and cooperation.

Thinking such as this—neither spiritual nor materialistic, but holistic, organic, environmental and evolutionary—was a genuine rarity in the Twenties. But the young Alfred van Vogt found it highly appealing and took to it eagerly.

The extraordinary ideas that he stumbled upon in *Science and the Modern World* would linger in the back of his mind. Eventually, after they had incubated long enough and become his own, they would emerge again as the philosophical basis for the science fiction van Vogt would write for Campbell's *Astounding*. And the fundamental difference distinguishing his stories from the Golden Age SF produced by all the writers who still remained card-carrying scientific materialists

would be van Vogt's Whitehead-inspired post-materialistic sense of a universe of interconnected organisms evolving together.

As the months that followed high school wore on, it became clear that there was a limit to the length of time that young Alfred could go on burying himself in his books and insisting to everyone that he was a writer even though he had never written anything. Early in 1931, van Vogt took a Civil Service examination, was offered a temporary government job, and accepted it. He traveled east to Ottawa, the capital city of Canada, where he would spend ten highly formative months as a clerk tabulating the Canadian census.

Van Vogt's imagination was captured by the holistic quality of the census, with its populations of information to be examined first from this angle and then from that. One result of this fascination would be that in years to come, when a Doc Smith was still describing the thinking machine of tomorrow as no more than a gigantic card sorter, and a Robert Heinlein had gotten no further than to conceive of a ponderous and unreliable "ballistic calculator" used for the single specialized purpose of working out spaceship rocket burn requirements, A. E. van Vogt would be envisioning the computer of the future as an information machine of such power as to be capable of keeping up to-the-instant census data for every inhabited planet of the Solar System and delivering simultaneous answers to a multiplicity of questioners located at separate terminals.

Another thing that would stick in van Vogt's imagination from his sojourn in Ottawa—and eventually find expression in his SF stories—would be a powerful secret that he was let in on by his boardinghouse roommate, a young man who had recently been brought over to Canada from Scotland. He informed Alfred that his flag-waving neighbors back in Moeden, Manitoba had had it all wrong: the English didn't rule the British Empire at all; they only thought they did. The actual covert masters of empire were the Scotch, taking their revenge for the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden. And just as soon as the roommate had earned his college degree, he expected to assume the place that was being held for him behind the scenes in the Canadian government.

Since van Vogt enjoyed no comparable secret support from well-placed Dutch-Canadian cabalists, he had no alternative but to catch a freight train back to Winnipeg when the work of compiling the 1931 census was over. But during his time in Ottawa, he'd made a serious start toward learning how to become the writer he was already claiming to be. From the Palmer Institute of Authorship, he took a correspondence course in "English and Self-Expression." The long term consequence of this course would be to set him thinking about the possible subliminal effects of particular sounds and unorthodox word selections.

Then, back home in Winnipeg, he took out of the library Thomas Uzzell's *Narrative Technique*, and two highly useful books by John Gallishaw, *The Only Two Ways to Write a Story* and *Twenty Problems of a Short-Story Writer*—precisely the manuals of instruction that a young Jack Williamson, newly dropped out of college to become a full-time writer, was choosing to study at about this same time. From Gallishaw, van Vogt learned the necessity of writing sentences that conveyed either emotion, imagery or suspense, and how to break a story down into a series of short scenes, each with its own distinct purpose. From Uzzell, he took the idea that a story should make a unified impact upon the reader.

At last, after all this study, the 20-year-old van Vogt felt ready to try writing a story of his own. But what kind of story should it be?

He didn't read confession magazines himself, but van Vogt had noticed that *True Story*, the top such magazine, had a prize contest in every issue. So he decided to be audacious and take a shot at that. He went off to the library, and with Uzzell and Gallishaw backing him at either elbow, he managed to write the first scene of a story.

What he was attempting seemed chancy to van Vogt. All the time he was working, he kept waking in the night and going round and round about what was to come next. But after turning out one scene each day for nine days, he managed to finish a story which he called, "I Live in the Streets." This was about a girl who had run into hard times in the Depression and been thrown out of her rooming house. It didn't win any prizes, but *True Story* did buy and publish it.

During the next three years, from 1932 to 1935, van Vogt had

## Read This

Recently read and recommended by

Phillip C. Jennings:

A lot of new sf is off limits to me, because I react as a writer, not as a reader. So it's good to discover *A Different Flesh* by Harry Turtledove, a book that seduced me into simple enjoyment. Harry Harrison's latest *Eden* book also put my internal editor/critic on hold, if less well than his first.

Mostly, though, I stray into foreign fields. Tom Sharpe's best book was *Wilt*, where he confined himself to two oddly likeable protagonists, but I've enjoyed the savage humor of *Vintage Stuff* and *Ancestral Vices*, despite my inability to identify with any particular character. (Warning: Tom's idea of American accents is strange.)

I've also indulged in a Sara Paretsky orgy: five mysteries involving Chicago private eye V. I. Warshawski. They made me fantasize about switching genres. I didn't like *Indemnity Only* quite as much as *Bitter Medicine*, *Killing Orders*, *Dead-lock* or *Blood Shot*.

Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way* is a character study of three middle-aged Englishwomen in the early 1980's. There's absolutely nothing here I can import into my own repertoire, nothing at all, yet it gave me a good two-day wallow.

My local chain bookstores have sacrificed their science shelves to make room for New Age crap. I've been obliged to re-read older stuff: *The Left Hand of Creation* by Barrow and Silk, and *The Quest for S443* by David H. Clark. I've all sorts of questions to ask the next physicist I meet, about neutrinos and gravitinos and zinos: *TLHoC* made me hungry for meatier fare.

I did find Stephen Gould's *An Urchin in the Storm*. His essays are a bit much one after the other. I advise reading them in alternation with the Paretsky novels.

Probably the most exploitable book I've read lately was Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire: Genesis*, a source for events in New World history prior to 1700. This is a searing and astonishing chronicle.

regular success selling simple, emotional, anonymous little stories to the confession magazines, and even won a thousand dollar prize with one. But then—as though his inner being had come to the sudden conclusion that if practice was what he had been after in writing these stories, he had had practice enough—in the middle of another true confession he felt disgusted with himself, threw down his pen, and wrote no more of them.

But if it was not sufficient to write whatever was easiest to sell, then what was his writing for? Van Vogt wasn't altogether sure. In the middle Thirties, he would write trade newspaper interviews, short radio plays, and an occasional short story for a newspaper supplement or a pulp magazine. He learned from this work, but none of it was completely satisfying. At the same time, he had been told that he had the ability to write for the slick magazines, but he felt a strong aversion to attempting this which he couldn't altogether explain.

Because he was a reader, a writer, and a thinker, van Vogt regarded himself as an intellectual. But if he was an intellectual, it was not of the usual sort. He wasn't silver-tongued or swift-witted. He had very little ability to remember a precise fact or an exact niggly, and no talent at all for linear thought and logical analysis. He was not a conventional man of reason.

Rather, van Vogt's usual method was to fix on some question or subject in a highly single-minded way—to surround it and dwell upon it and absorb it. He might get nowhere with a problem for the longest time, but then at last the penny would drop and some insight would pop into his mind.

When van Vogt had enough insights accumulated on a topic, they would assemble themselves into what he would come to think of as a system—a methodology or mode of approach that had its own consistency, if only in the manner in which it was applied by him. In later days, van Vogt would even take pride in describing himself as "Mr. System."

The insight that he might write science fiction, and that he should write science fiction, dawned on him in the summer of 1938. It came with typical suddenness and indirection. After eight years in which he had not read any science fiction, one day when he was in McKnight's Drug Store in Winnipeg, van Vogt casually picked up the latest issue of *Astounding*, a magazine he had never paid any attention to before. He flipped on through to the middle pages, and began to read a story.

But not just any story. Amazingly... coincidentally... significantly... perhaps even inevitably... the story that he singled out in this apparently completely random fashion was "Who Goes There?" by Don A. Stuart—the prototypical example of modern science fiction.

Van Vogt was immediately hooked by the mood and the flavor of what he was reading. And so he bought the magazine and hurried on home to finish the story he'd started—to savor it, to linger over it, and to think about it.

What struck van Vogt most forcibly about "Who Goes There?" wasn't exactly the thing that would catch the attention of those readers who were still staunch scientific materialists. All that they would see was the morally neutral message that even a shape-shifting otherworldly monster might be subject to the universal power of human scientific knowledge. We might recall, for instance, that Isaac Asimov, responding to this same story, would write his first attempt at modern science fiction—"Stowaway," or "The Callistan Menace"—about another threatening alien creature that human beings come to understand scientifically.

But what van Vogt took from his reading of "Who Goes There?" was something quite different from this. What intrigued him about this story was its intimation of a cooperative ethic—a new ordering of value appropriate to the post-materialistic universe he had been tuning over and over in his mind since he first read Whitehead.

That is, van Vogt noticed that those human beings in the Antarctic party of "Who Goes There?" who retained their sanity were able to work together to overcome a creature who on an individual basis was far more powerful than any of them. And conversely, he saw that the horrific alien, even though it might be both telepathic and originally one being, was not able to join its various parts together to take concerted action. Indeed, its selfishness and egoism were so complete as to affect even samples of its blood, so that at the threat of a hot wire these would scream and strive to escape, and thereby betray their non-human nature.

And this all had a rightness for van Vogt. It seemed to him that in an organic, interconnected universe, cooperation would be a fundamental value, a reflection of the purposes of the whole. And selfishness would be a fatal ethical defect no matter how outwardly powerful the entity might appear to be.

"Who Goes There?" altered van Vogt's life. Just as surely as if someone had seized him by the shoulders and physically realigned him, reading this story turned van Vogt around and pointed him in a new direction.

In the science fiction stories that he would come to write during the next half-dozen years, van Vogt would work out the answers to the cluster of questions that were first aroused by his reading "Who Goes There?"

In an organic universe, wherein does true superiority lie?

Does might in and of itself make right?

What connection exists between evolution and altruism?

And—his most persistent line of inquiry—how would a genuinely superior creature behave? How would it act? And how would it be perceived by lesser beings?

For us to say all this, however, is not only to anticipate the direction in which A. E. van Vogt would travel, but to state with some clarity what was not necessarily at all clear to him in the summer of 1938 when he put aside the August *Astounding* to reach for a sheet of letter paper and an envelope. It is perfectly possible, perhaps even probable, that he had no explicit memory of *Science and the Modern World*, or thoughts of post-materialism, or formed convictions about the moral nature of transcendent being in his mind at all. In the immediate moment, all that he may have known for certain was that he had an urgent idea for an SF story.

In complete unawareness that Don A. Stuart, the nominal author of "Who Goes There?", and the editor of the magazine he'd been reading were one and the same, van Vogt drafted a letter of inquiry. As an indication of his serious intent, he summarized his past experience as a writer. Then, in a paragraph, he outlined his idea. Would *Astounding* be interested in taking a look at a story like this?

He mailed the letter off to New York, and then waited for some sort of answer to come. One moment, he was rarin' to go—ready to take over the universe and transform it with his imagination. He knew how to tell a story, after all. And from his teenage reading of *Amazing*, he knew his way around science fiction. So why shouldn't he write SF and do it well? In the next instant, however, he would start to feel all unsure of himself, like a shy kid new to the neighborhood who has to have an invitation before he can bring himself to come outside and play.

But if encouragement was what he had to have in order to begin writing SF, John Campbell did not let him down. Van Vogt would say later:

I feel pretty sure that if he hadn't answered, that would have been the end of my science fiction career. I didn't knock it at the time, but he answered all such letters.

When he replied, he said, "In writing this story, be sure to concentrate on the mood and atmosphere. Don't make it just an action story."

This was precisely the right thing to say to van Vogt. It had been that splendidly atmospheric opening sentence—"The place stank."—which had first hooked him into reading "Who Goes There?" And the creation of story mood was the very thing van Vogt felt he knew how to do best.

So, feeling under some real obligation to follow through now that he had received this go-ahead from Campbell, he set out to work on his story. He called upon the familiar methods he'd derived from the Palmer Institute, John Gallishaw and Thomas Uzzell: particular words and sounds used strangely for effect; sentences of constant suspense, imagery and emotion; one purposeful scene after another; all aiming towards a final unified impact.

The eventual title of the story would be "Vault of the Beast." It began:

The creature crept. It whimpered from fear and pain. Shapeless, formless thing yet changing shape and form with



each jerky movement, it crept along the corridor of the space freighter, fighting the terrible urge of its elements to take the shape of its surroundings. A gray blob of disintegrating stuff, it crept and cascaded, it rolled, flowed and dissolved, every movement an agony of struggle against the abnormal need to become a stable shape. Any shape!

This creature bears an immediately apparent resemblance to the menace of "Who Goes There?" It, too, is a telepathic shapeshifter capable of assuming the form of any human it encounters. But it also has its differences from Campbell's monster. It isn't able to proffer and take over other beings, and it isn't autonomous.

In fact, this half-hysterical, half-terrified, yet casually murderous thing—which van Vogt called both a "robot" and an "android" and described both as organic and a machine—is a construct that has been made by "great and evil minds" from another and slower dimension than ours. It has been dispatched to Earth to find a mathematician capable of freeing one of their kind who millions of years ago fell into our space and while helpless was imprisoned in a vault by the Martians of the day, who sensed its underlying ill intent.

If this mighty prisoner should become free, it can show its fellows the way to transfer from one dimension to another. And that is what they yearn for. As they admit, at the moment they think their designs have finally been achieved: "Our purpose is to control all spaces, all worlds—particularly those which are inhabited. We intend to be absolute rulers of the entire universe."

The malevolent aliens use their shape-changing robot creature to manipulate, delude and sweet-talk an Earthman into divining how the vault might be opened. But when this has been accomplished, they give their true nature away. They propose to use the android as the key to the lock, and take evident pleasure in the pain it suffers as they wrench it out of the human form it has assumed and twist it into the requisite shape.

Brender, the Earthman, cannot avoid the recognition that he has been tricked. At exactly the same moment, however, he also comes to the sudden realization that the act of opening the ancient sand-buried Martian prison is going to cause the destruction of its occupant and ruin the aliens' schemes for conquest.

The poor screaming robot can still read Brender's mind. It knows what he knows. Even yet it might want its makers and possibly save its own life—but it elects not to. It permits itself to be sacrificed. The vault is opened, and the evil alien within perishes—and with it its knowledge of how to travel from one dimension to another.

As the now-dying robot struggles in vain to return to human form, it explains to Brender:

"I didn't tell them . . . I caught your thought . . . and kept it . . . from them . . . Because they were hurting me. They were going to destroy me. Because . . . I liked . . . being human. I was . . . somebody!"

The aliens, it seems, have been undone by their own remoteness, deviousness and casual cruelty. And while Brender looks on in pity, the android dissolves into a puddle of gray, which then crumbles into dust.

When he had finished this story, van Vogt mailed it off to *Astounding*. And just as van Vogt had managed to recognize "Who Goes There?" when he needed to, so John Campbell was able to reciprocate and to perceive from the outset that in this new Canadian storyteller he had discovered someone most unusual.

The first thing that he noticed in reading "Vault of the Beast" was just how immediate and raw-nerved and intense it was. It didn't sit still for one minute, but moved ahead with the inexorable pace of a fevered dream. Writing as relentless as this had never been seen in the SF pulp magazines.

The story was also boldly, even extravagantly science-fictional. We may recall that only five years earlier, the venerable H. G. Wells had suggested that to include more than a single wonder in any SF story was to step over the line into irresponsible silliness. He had declared, somewhat testily, "Nothing remains interesting where anything can happen."

But here was a rank beginner who seemed to have no compunctions at all against throwing a profusion of marvels into one brief novelet: a protean monster/robot/android; space travel; telepathy;

malevolent higher aliens; a multiplicity of dimensions operating at different time rates; inter-dimensional transference; a long-vanished Martian civilization; antigravity; the "ultimate prime number"; no less than two different kinds of "ultimate metal"; and an irresistible superabundance of wonders add up to a real and meaningful story.

But the most original and impressive aspect of "Vault of the Beast" was that a considerable portion of the story was told from point of view of a whimpering, blobby, shape-altering thing. Not only this, but van Vogt even asked the reader to empathize with the creature and to regret its passing. This was completely unheard of. Nobody had ever dared before to write from inside the psyche of so different and monstrous a being.

As powerful, imaginative and unusual as van Vogt's story recognizably was, however, Campbell couldn't help feeling that it wasn't yet as sound and effective as it might be.

To begin with, it wasn't altogether plausible. If the headlong pace of the narrative should be interrupted for even an instant and exact questions be asked, there was much in this story that would not hold up under examination.

This would, in fact, always be van Vogt's weakest point. Like his mentor, Alfred North Whitehead, he would be muddled and fruitful rather than limited but clear.

In later times, van Vogt would say of the writers of the Golden Age: "In a sense we were all One Great Big Author." And there would be considerable aptness to this observation. However, to the extent that the body of Campbellian science fiction did amount to a whole—the synergistic product of many separate and partial individuals' contributions—it would be writers other than A. E. van Vogt who would supply it with its detailed plausible arguments. Without the comparatively restrained and careful work of de Camp, Heinlein, Asimov and the others, van Vogt's flights of dreamlike imagination might very easily have seemed completely unfounded—just as without his work, many of their stories might have seemed lacking in mystery.

There was a further difficulty with "Vault of the Beast" beyond its imperfect plausibility. Despite the sound advice of Thomas Uzzell, it wasn't unified in its effect.

The central questions raised by the story appeared to be how the android creature was to contrive to win the freedom of the long-imprisoned alien, and what this evil being and as kind might do if it were allowed to escape from the Martian vault. At the climax of the story, however, all this possibility and danger prove to be nothing more than an illusion. At any time that the vault should be opened, it appears, the alien inside must inevitably perish.

So the main story problem was not a problem at all—and never had been. At this point, the emotional weight of "Vault of the Beast" shifted over to the death of the shape-changing robot, and the fluttering taste this wretched creature has acquired for the assumption of human form.

This alteration of emphasis did not work perfectly. At the very least, it appeared to Campbell that if the reader was to be hooked into identifying with this monster and looking upon it with pity, then more emphasis would have to be placed upon the emotions of the creature early in the story.

So Campbell returned the manuscript to van Vogt. He praised it highly, but suggested that it still needed some fine-tuning. The Earthman, Jim Brender, could use additional motivation. And the monster should be made more pitiable from the outset. Would van Vogt have a try at that?

Instead, however, his new would-be contributor overlooked Campbell's expectations entirely. By the time he heard from the editor, van Vogt was already at work on a second SF story that incorporated all he had learned in writing the first one. And it was going so well that he didn't want to set it aside.

It would be a good while before van Vogt got back to "Vault of the Beast" to rewrite it. In this form, arguably stronger, yet still not wholly satisfactory because of the central non-problem of the imprisoned alien—it would appear in the August 1940 issue of *Astounding* as his fifth published SF story. And this one extended delay for revision would be as close as he would ever come to having a story rejected by John Campbell until after the end of World War II.

It was the novelet "Black Destroyer," his second science fiction

## Read This

Recently read and recommended by Dan Simmons:

*The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* by Jeffrey C. Robinson, University of Oklahoma Press, 1989, \$18.95.

This book is for those of us who know that walking has more to do with the metaphysical than the physical. Robinson chronicles the literature of walking as a creative and transcendent meditative endeavor through excerpts from essays on walking by a wide range of post-Enlightenment poets, artists, and writers. This is required (and welcome) reading for the writer or reader who walks to think.

*Book of the Dead* by John Skipp and Craig Spector, Bantam, 1989, \$4.50.

This collection of zombie stories brings to mind Winston Churchill's comment about Calcutta—"I shall always be glad that I went there, if for no other reason than that now I shall never have to return." By all means, catch this final (or at least penultimate) buffet of splatterpunk sensibilities (sic) before this particular sub-genre of horror deliquesces out of sheer rhetorical overkill.

*Fade* by Robert Cormier, Delacorte Press, 1988, \$15.95.

Harlan Ellison recommended this book to me (and even opened his Secret Vault #3 to find a copy for me) and he was right, it's good. Young Paul Moreaux has inherited the gift of being able to "fade"—become invisible—and his use of that ability creates a powerful fable of the secrets and silences of young adulthood. Cormier pulls no punches in his exploration of the mysteries of sexuality, family, and the terrible curse of a unique talent.

*John Keats: The Making of a Poet* by Aileen Ward, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1963, reprinted 1986, \$11.95.

Speaking of Unique talent, I searched out dozens of books on the life and works of John Keats for my two novels *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, but few were as succinct, accurate, and enjoyable as this simple biography. Ward offers serious insight into Keats's creative genius and tragic early death.

*The Abyss* by Orson Scott Card, based on an original screenplay by John Cameron, Pocket Books, 1989, \$4.50.

This is that rarest of rare species (and perhaps *ad generic*)—a novelization with the depth and power of a novel.

Card has done a fine job of creating real human beings out of the cardboard constructs of action-movie characters, and the deep-sea technologies he describes are fascinating.

*The Enlightenment: An Interpretation—The Science of Freedom* by Peter Gay, W. W. Norton & Company, 1969, reprinted 1977, \$13.95 paperback.

Fans of Peter Gay may know him from his more recent works such as *Freud* or the wonderful *Education of the Senses: The Bourgeois Experience—Victoria to Freud*, but my favorite books by him are his two volumes on the Enlightenment, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* and *The Science of Freedom*. Recently I was delighted to find both of these in paperback. While these books may be enjoyed many times over for the perspective they give on the past and present age, it takes only one reading to realize what a loss of cultural IQ we've suffered when the dialogue of theology is all but lost today in the grunts and cries of fundamentalism and the quest for political and social justice has culminated in constitutional amendments to protect the flag.

*Infinite in All Directions: Gifford Lectures Given at Aberdeen, Scotland, April-November, 1985* by Freeman Dyson, Harper & Row, 1988.

For the money, Freeman Dyson remains the most exciting and challenging mind writing about science today. *Infinite in All Directions* deals with a panoply of topics—biology, the foundations of science, future engineering, origins of life, and philosophy—but whether Dyson is discussing the wonders of diversity in micro-organisms and societies, or the advantages of an "astrochicken" bio-cybermechanical interplanetary explorer, or the future of the divided Germanies along the Austrian plan, he is always interesting, always thought-provoking, and frequently moving as he deals with matters true to the human spirit. As the subtitle indicates, these lectures were given in 1985 when Dyson was the chosen Gifford Lecturer at Aberdeen, but unlike so many speculations by prominent scientists, these ideas have not been made obsolete by recent developments . . . nor is there any likelihood that they will be in our lifetimes. Dyson has that rarest of gifts of being able to combine scientific rigor with the heart and mind of a born dreamer.

story, which convinced Campbell that this "Alfred Vogt"—as he would address him at the outset—wasn't just another highly promising beginner who required tutoring and guidance. On the basis of this singular story, it became evident to the editor that this 26-year-old from Winnipeg—just two years younger than Campbell himself—had already arrived as a wild imaginative talent unmatched in science fiction.

Van Vogt demonstrated in "Black Destroyer" that the apparent virtues of his first effort had been neither an illusion nor a fluke. His new story had the very same strengths: Once again, he started his story with a dynamic and gripping first line "On and on Coeur prowled"—and then hurtled along from there. Once again, he asked the reader to identify with the drives and purposes of a powerful alien creature. And once again, he offhandedly mixed together a multiplicity of SF concepts, any one of which another writer might have thought more than sufficient to serve as the basis for a story.

But this time his plot was more integrated. Better than that—unlike "Vault of the Beast" and its model, "Who Goes There?", which still

retained overtones of the conventional Techno Age alien invasion story—"Black Destroyer" had a situation that was completely new and different.

And still better yet was that this novellet was a brilliant anticipation of science fiction as Campbell thought it ought to be and wished it to become.

The direction in which the great editor desired to move science fiction was toward human dominion over the future and outer space. And in "Black Destroyer" van Vogt imagined an exploration vessel from a future human civilization which spans the galaxy landing on a planet of a red sun that is separated from its nearest neighbor by nine hundred light years.

What a premise this was! An interstellar survey team from an Earth-derived human civilization that is as broad as the galaxy! Some fifteen years later, in the mid-Fifties, a story background of this kind would be quite commonplace in *Astounding*. But in 1939, nothing quite like it had ever been imagined before.

It was John Campbell's conviction that if it was going to be possible someday for men to travel to the planets and the stars and establish control over the wider universe, the necessary job for science fiction had to be to identify every possible problem or hindrance to this, and then to imagine how each one might be dealt with. The real flaw in "Vault of the Beast" from the editor's point of view was that it didn't actually pose any problem of responsibility and control for men to resolve.

But "Black Destroyer" did.

In this story, human scientists exploring the isolated world they have discovered set their spherical ship down near the remains of a long-destroyed city. And here they encounter the bizarre and powerful Coeurl, a catlike creature with fangs and massive forepaws, tentacles that grow from his shoulders, and tendril-like ears, whom they eventually identify as a degenerate survivor of this ruined civilization.

As the Techno Age would reckon matters, Coeurl is a clearly superior being, more than a match for any one man. Not only is he immensely long-lived, but he is quick, strong and deadly. He is able to breathe chlorine or oxygen indifferently. Through his ear-tendrils, he can hear sounds, pick up the vibrations given off by the precious life-substance *id*, and also detect, broadcast and control electro-magnetic phenomena. And with his prehensile tentacle, he can instantly operate sophisticated machinery he has never encountered before, including the great globular human spaceship itself.

Coeurl is a living example of cosmic hostility. He is a ruthless and practiced killer. He and his kind have leveled their civilization, fought amongst themselves, and devoured all other living things in this world in a desperate death struggle to obtain "the all-necessary *id*"—eventually identified by a human scientist to be the element phosphorus.

Before the humans manage to recognize Coeurl's true nature and power, this utterly rapacious being has ripped one man to pieces to obtain his *id*, and then murdered another twelve men as they sleep. When he is found out at last—his carnage discovered—Coeurl escapes to the spaceship engine room, barricades himself there, and then launches himself and the human party into interstellar space.

However, if Coeurl is a representative of unrelenting Techno Age cosmic hostility, it is as perceived through revisionist Atomic Age eyes. And the Atomic Age would not only doubt that there can be such a thing as total difference or absolute superiority, but would boldly assert that men may scientifically investigate anything and everything that exists in search of the most convenient handle to grab it by.

We might think back to the members of the Antarctic party in Campbell's "Who Goes There?" Though confronted by a shapeshifting alien monster, they are able to calmly say, "This isn't wildly beyond what we already know. It's just a modification we haven't seen before. It's as natural, as logical, as any other manifestation of life. It obeys exactly the same laws."

In highly similar fashion, even though the human scientists of "Black Destroyer" may find themselves up to their knees in corpses and gore as their spaceship screams toward the stars under the guidance of an *id*-crazed cat-creature endowed with powers like none they have ever encountered before, Commander Morton, the leader of the expedition, is able to overcome any impulses he might be feeling toward fear and panic and deal coolly with the situation. He declares: "We're going to find out right now if we're dealing with an unlimited science, or a creature limited like the rest of us. I'll bet on the second possibility."

And that's a pretty good bet. Capable and dangerous Coeurl may be, but he's by no means either all-powerful or invulnerable. He had a number of weaknesses and limitations—crippling defects of ability, knowledge, mentation and perspective.

Foremost among these is Coeurl's animism. Ever since H. G. Wells's invading Martians, alien beings had displayed a taste for human blood and proved their own superiority by looking upon men as cattle. For van Vogt, however, Coeurl's insatiable appetite for *id* identifies him, and not his human victims, as the animal.

Coeurl is driven by lusts and hungers and lacks self-control. It doesn't take a lot to unbalance his psyche.

He can be thrown by his greed for phosphorus: "The sense of *id* was so overwhelming that his brain drifted to the ultimate verge of chaos."

Unexpectedness—even so little as the closing of a door and the

movement of an elevator—can unsettle him: "He whirled with a savage snarl, his reason whirling into chaos. With one leap, he pounced at the door. The metal bent under his plunge, and the desperate pain maddened him. Now, he was all trapped animal."

And maybe he can make him manic and cause him to forget his purposes: "It was the seventh taste of murder that brought a sudden return of lust, pure, unbounded desire to kill, return of a millennium-old habit of destroying everything containing the precious *id*."

Over and over, Coeurl gives himself away by these descents into animality. They cause him to act prematurely, to betray his intentions, and to reveal his awesome but combatable powers.

Moreover, when Coeurl isn't acting like a heedless beast, he is a blind egotist. All that he can see in the human scientific expedition is new inferiorities to serve as a fresh supply of essential *id*. And beyond that, an opportunity for himself and the others of his kind who still survive to leap to the stars and seize even more *id*:

For just a moment, he felt contempt, a glow of superiority, as he thought of the stupid creatures who dared match their wit against a Coeurl. And in that moment, he suddenly thought of other Coeurls. A queer, exultant sense of race pounded through his being, the driving hate of centuries of ruthless competition yielded reluctantly before pride of kinship with the future rulers of all space.

At every turn Coeurl believes himself to be more powerful and able and in control than he actually is, and he automatically dismisses the human opposition he faces without ever pausing to think very deeply about its true nature.

But, in fact, there is a profound difference between the humans and him. Their galactic civilization has solved the problem of cyclical history, while Coeurl and his kind have not, so they know a great deal about him while he knows nothing about them.

The men can look at his historical context and his behavior and gauge Coeurl accurately as a degenerate and a criminal. As the archaeologist Korita observes: "In fact, his whole record is one of the low cunning of the primitive, egotistical mind which has little or no conception of the vast organization with which it is confronted."

It is wholly typical of Coeurl that he should take over the engine room of the spherical spaceship under the apparent assumption that being where the power is located will be sufficient to make him master of the situation—and also typical that he should be mistaken. In fact, it is the humans who occupy the ship's control room who actually direct the ship and its machines.

What's more, they possess science that Coeurl does not, and dares not face. He may be able to blank out remote pictures of himself, to take a shot in the head from a vibration gun without suffering harm, to disrupt electric locks, and to harden the door to the engine room by increasing "the electronic tensions of the door to their ultimate." But he cannot redirect, ward off, or absorb atomic power. Consequently, once the humans do manage to break into the engine room, they have an effective weapon with which to attack him.

Coeurl must escape from this threat. So able is he, within his limits, that he can throw together an individual spaceship right then and there in the machine shop of the great ship. And in this little ship, he attempts to flee back to his own planet to gather his kind.

But alone in space is just where the humans would like to see Coeurl. They have vast experience there, while he has none. As Korita says: "We have, then, a primitive, and that primitive is now far out in space, completely outside of his natural habitat."

And, indeed, Coeurl does find space disconcerting. Given his tendency to lose his head, it isn't surprising that he should be thrown into confusion when all his usual expectations begin to be overturned.

First the human ship suddenly disappears from view. Then it seems that he is going backwards, away from his planet, rather than toward it, as he should. And finally, the human ship—which by Coeurl's reckoning should be far behind—suddenly proves to be waiting in front of him.

It is all too much for Coeurl, and he becomes overwhelmed by panic. Fearing the flames of men wielding atomic disintegrators, he wills his own death:

They found him lying dead in a little pool of phosphorus. "Poor pussy," said Morton. "I wonder what he thought when he saw us appear ahead of him, after his own sun disappeared. Knowing nothing of anti-accelerators, he couldn't know that we could stop short in space, whereas it would take him more than three hours to decelerate; and in the meantime he'd be drawing farther and farther away from where he wanted to go. He couldn't know that by stopping, we flashed by him at millions of miles a second. Of course, he didn't have a chance once he left our ship. The whole world must have seemed topsy-turvy."

And, in fact, with this brilliant novelet, van Vogt would turn all Techno Age perception upside-down. In previous science fiction, it had always been invading aliens who had the universe on their side and men who had to overcome a limited Earth-bound perspective. But in "Black Destroyer," these values were reversed. Despite their power as individuals, it is Coeurl and his kind who are the limited offspring of a small and isolated planet, and it is human beings who have the knowledge and resources of the galaxy behind them.

What a promise! When he saw this, John Campbell's heart had to leap.

The editor wrote to van Vogt, saying, "You've done a perfectly beautiful job on this yarn about the Black Destroyer." And he would place this new writer's first published SF story on the cover of the July 1939 *Astounding*, the issue which marked the beginning of the Golden Age.

In his letter accepting "Black Destroyer," Campbell described *Unknown*, a fantasy magazine he was starting, at some length, and asked van Vogt to consider it a wide-open market. Campbell thought that writing fantasy would come naturally to van Vogt, with his gift for evoking mood and horror. The editor declared, "If this 'Black Destroyer' had not been interplanetary, had not involved atomic power, mechanism, etc., it would have been grand for the new magazine."

And van Vogt did his best to oblige Campbell by giving him what he was asking for. More or less immediately, he wrote a story about a Polynesian shark-god—"The Sea Thing" (*Unknown*, Jan 1940)—that was his attempt to do something like "Black Destroyer" in fantasy dress. And in 1942-43, he would contribute three more stories to the magazine, including a novel, *The Book of Psalms* (*Unknown Works*, Oct 1943), in the very last issue.

But even though van Vogt might not be a man for facts and exactitude, and had a certain talent for evoking moods, writing rational fantasy just wasn't his thing. Ultimately, stories like that hinged on providing material explanations for bits and pieces of remnant spiritualism, and playing that game wasn't what van Vogt had returned to SF to do. Consequently, he wrote stories he thought of as fantasy only with the utmost difficulty, and his work for *Unknown* was no match for his science fiction in either originality or effectiveness.

Van Vogt only caught fire when he was writing what he believed in, and his true beliefs were post-materialistic. His great aim in writing SF was to look deep into the time and space distances of an organic, interconnected, evolving universe and imagine transcending himself.

Between the sale of "Black Destroyer" and its publication, van Vogt married Edna Hull, a woman seven years older than he. She was a former executive secretary, a freelance writer of newspaper features and short-stories for church magazines whom he had met at the Winnipeg Writer's Club. After their marriage, Mrs. van Vogt would transcribe her husband's handwritten drafts on the typewriter and in the process become sufficiently intrigued by SF that she would eventually write a dozen stories of her own for *Astounding* and *Unknown* under the name E. Wayne Hull.

The first story van Vogt completed after his marriage was a direct sequel to "Black Destroyer" entitled "Discord in Scarlet" (*Astounding*, Dec 1939). Here the same human survey ship, this time traveling from our own galaxy to another, comes upon Xil, a red six-limbed alien being even older, more powerful and more frightening than Coeurl, floating there in the void where a cosmic explosion had hurled him eons ago.

Once he has been permitted inside the barriers that protect the human ship, Xil proves to be able to rearrange his atomic structure so

as to pass through floors and walls at will. Then he begins playing an elaborate game of hide-and-go-seek in which he suddenly appears out of nowhere, seizes and paralyzes a man, preferably a nice fat one, and carries him away to deposit one of his eggs in.

The humans are awestruck by the creature's ability to survive in space and to walk through walls. And one of them declares, "A race which has solved the final secrets of biology must be millions, even billions of years in advance of man."

Psychologically, however, Xil is much less advanced. Despite the opportunity he has been granted for heavy meditation all alone there in the timeless quiet of the extra-galactic darkness, his thinking remains cycle-bound. And Korta the archaeologist is able to recognize that Xil displays the blinkered vision typical of a peasant.

As a peasant, his first aim is to safeguard his posterity. It is his overriding concern to find hosts for the eggs he carries within his breast that gives men the time they need to organize themselves and to devise plans against him.

Furthermore, having a peasant's personal attachment to his own little territory, Xil is unable to conceive until too late that the men might actually halt their ship in the middle of intergalactic space and then abandon it in order to trap him alone inside while they temporarily turn their ship into "a devastating, irresistible amount of energy" to rid themselves of him.

After Xil has fled into the intergalactic dark, one crew member suggests that they had a natural advantage over the creature: "After all, he did belong to another universe and there is a special rhythm to our present state of existence to which man is probably attuned!"

But another replies:

"You assume far too readily that man is a paragon of justice, forgetting apparently that he lives on meat, enslaves his neighbors, murders his opponents, and obtains the most unholily sadistical joy from the agony of others. It is not impossible that we shall, in the course of our travels, meet other intelligent creatures far more worthy than man to rule the universe."

In these first three science fiction stories by van Vogt—"Vault of the Beast," "Black Destroyer," and "Discord in Scarlet"—there were two common elements. The more readily apparent of these was monsters possessing more-than-human powers. Indeed, so obvious was this that it would begin to seem to some—van Vogt himself among them—that it was possible he was only a one-plot author.

A more complete and sympathetic assessment, however, would understand that van Vogt was yet another intuitional SF writer following his nose wherever it chose to lead him—and, moreover, one who had rather less conscious awareness of where he was bound and what he was really up to than was usual even amongst this gang of creative sleepwalkers.

Van Vogt would begin writing a story when he had nothing more to work with than some faint glimmering—an image, or a mood—and then grope his way toward the end one scene at a time, working by feel and by inspiration. He would say frankly: "I have no endings for my stories when I start them—just a thought and something that excites me. I get some picture that is very interesting and I write it. But I don't know where it's going to go next."

He would throw in every single idea that he had during the time that he was writing a story, holding back nothing. And when he got stuck, van Vogt found that necessary new turn he needed would arrive in a dream that night or in a flash sometime the following morning.

Generally, either in a dream or about ten o'clock the next morning—bang—an idea comes and it will be something in a sense non-sequitur, yet a growth from the story. I've gotten my most original stories that way; these ideas made the story different every ten pages. In other words, I wouldn't have been able to reason them out, I feel.

As we have had more than one occasion to notice, earlier writers of SF, in imagining their stories, had again and again taken their cue from some dream or sudden insight. But A. E. van Vogt was the first

writer of science fiction to attempt to turn this into a system and rely upon non-rational processes to light his way through one story after another.

However, the truth of the matter may be that he simply couldn't help but do this. Writing out of mental imagery, lack of conscious foreknowledge of what was to come next, and dreamstuff was the only effective way that van Vogt knew to produce science fiction at all. He says, "I have tried to plot stories consciously, from beginning to end, and I never sell them. I know better, now, than to even attempt to write them that way."

The less obvious, less superficial, common element in van Vogt's earlier stories—the message from his unconscious that he was forced to repeat until at last he understood it—was *morality*, or, as the more psychologically-minded Atomic Age would prefer to call it, *sanity*. In each of his first three science fiction stories, super-powered monsters are undone by their drives and hungers, by their egotism, ruthlessness and cruelty, and by their inability to surrender cherished attachments, while men constituted much like ourselves are able to prevail over them through decency, self-sacrifice, cooperation and breadth of vision.

After three of these science fiction monster stories—plus that pale imitation for *Unknown*—and just when he was beginning to think that this might be all he could write, van Vogt finally came to a conscious recognition of what his unconscious mind had been getting at all along. It was telling him that true superiority was not a matter of age or biology or personal power. Rather, it lay in being able to distinguish between mere self-interest and the good of the whole.

Having finally gotten this message, van Vogt would state it as explicitly as he could in his next science fiction story, the aptly titled "Repetition" (*Astounding*, Apr 1940).

In this story, an envoy has been sent from Earth to persuade the stubbornly defiant colonists of the Jovian moon Europa to allow their world to be ceded politically to Mars in order to bring Mars into union with Earth and Venus and forestall a Solar System-wide war. The envoy admits that short-term suffering for this colony is a real possibility, but argues that it should lead to a greater long-range good:

"Remember this, it's not only Europa's recoverable metals that will be used up in a thousand years, but also the metal resources of the entire Solar System. That's why we must have an equitable distribution now, because we can't afford to spend the last hundred of those thousand years fighting over metal with Mars. You see, in that thousand years we must reach the stars. We must develop speeds immeasurably greater than light—and in that last, urgent hundred years we must have their co-operation, not their enmity. Therefore they must not be dependent on us for anything, and we must not be under the continual mind-destroying temptation of being able to save ourselves for a few years longer if we sacrifice them."

The envoy's concluding exhortation, which convinces a young European to switch from being his enemy to being his earnest protector, is this:

"I have talked of repetition being a rule of life. But somewhere along the pathway of the Universe there must be a first time for everything, a first peaceful solution along sound sociological lines of the antagonisms of great sovereign powers."

"Some day man will reach the stars, and all the old, old problems will repeat themselves. When that day comes, we must have established sanity in the very souls of men, so firmly rooted that there will be an endless repetition of peaceful solutions."

This story had little of the intensity, heat and drive that had made van Vogt's three previous science fiction stories different from all other SF. Next to them, "Repetition" was merely conventional—similar in appearance and scope to other short fiction in *Astounding* in 1940. More than that, it was a talky story, in essence no more than a dramatized lecture.

Even so, it did have one highly important statement to make. If men were ever to become the beings van Vogt had described in "Black Destroyer"—if they were ever to reach the stars at all, let alone inherit the galaxy—they would first have to learn simple sanity: breadth of vision, surrender of self-interest, and peaceful cooperation. And if they couldn't achieve this, they would be just so much chopped liver for creatures far simpler and less powerful than Coeur.

That this indeed was the point implicit for van Vogt in "Black Destroyer" and "Discord in Scarlet" would be confirmed in 1950 when he put these stories together with two others and added new material to make what he would call a "fix-up" novel—*The Voyage of the Space Beagle*. The overall point made by this book would be the necessity for integrated vision. Sanity.

In the novel, van Vogt would introduce a new central character, Elliot Grosvenor, a Nextalist, or applied holist. He might be understood as the van Vogtian equivalent of Heinlein's ideal man—the "encyclopedic synthesis" or master of all knowledge. The difference between them was that in Heinlein's version the weight of emphasis was on photographic memory and perfect command of fact, while in van Vogt's case the emphasis was on holistic vision.

At the outset of the story, Grosvenor is something of an odd man out aboard the exploration vessel. He is all but invisible:

He was becoming accustomed to being in the background. As the only Nextalist aboard the *Space Beagle*, he had been ignored for months by specialists who did not clearly understand what a Nextalist was, and who cared very little anyway. Grosvenor had plans to rectify that. So far, the opportunity to do so had not occurred.

Grosvenor intends to apply Nextalism to the splintered viewpoints of the various scientific specialists aboard the ship and to resolve the small-minded political infighting that divides the men of the *Space Beagle*. His opportunity to demonstrate the value of holistic thinking arrives in the encounters with Coeur and Xil—here given as Xil— and other bizarre life forms. With his broader view of things, Grosvenor becomes the person most responsible for the survival of the expedition.

By the end of the book, the need for Nextalist thought has become sufficiently well-established that Grosvenor is giving classes in holism to the men of the *Space Beagle* which even his former chief antagonist has begun to attend. Grosvenor says:

"The problems which Nextalism confronts are whole problems. Man has divided life and matter into separate compartments of knowledge and being. And, even though he sometimes uses words which indicate his awareness of that wholeness of nature, he continues to behave as if the one, changing universe has many separately functioning parts. The techniques we will discuss tonight . . . will show how this disparity between reality and man's behavior can be overcome."

In late 1939, however, van Vogt's thinking had not yet explicitly progressed as far as this. Rather, we can say that with "Repetition," he had answered one question for himself, but then raised another. He had satisfied himself that men who were well-integrated into the universe could face any selfish Village-minded creature to be found in this galaxy or beyond it, and prevail. But he had also begun to wonder what men must become if they were to be successful in making their own transition from the Village Solar System to the wider universe. ▶

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## The Stress of Her Regard by Tim Powers

New York: Ace, 1989; \$17.95 hc; approx. 400 pp.

reviewed by Greg Cox

Ever since *The Anubis Gates*, Tim Powers's novels have resisted categorization. This doesn't mean the attempt can't prove illuminating, and indeed I have been arguing for a year that Powers is essentially a horror writer, that despite the rousing adventure and derring-do, despite the elaborately worked-out systems of magic that often seem to have a trace of hard science at their core, the fantasy in these historical fantasies is fundamentally malevolent, caused by and causing only bloodshed and human suffering. God knows no one in their right mind would want to be a Powers hero (or heroine), who invariably takes a lot of physical and emotional damage and rarely survives to the final pages entirely intact. Michael Swanwick, in issue #12's essay on book-browsing, also came dangerously close to labeling Powers's previous novel, *On Stranger Tides*, as horror. Others, including Powers at the last Boskone, still insist that it is basically a rollicking good adventure story.

*The Stress of Her Regard* may not resolve this debate, but it provides plenty of ammunition for those of us who emphasize (not always unapologetically) the darker aspects of Powers's work. It is, without a doubt, his grimmest, bleakest book.

A lot of the gloom may be a result of the subject matter; rather than time-travellers (*The Anubis Gates*), future cities (*Dinner at Deviant's Palace*), or swashbuckling pirates (*On Stranger Tides*), this new novel focuses on the doom-haunted lives of the great Romantic poets and their companions: Byron, Shelley, Keats, Mary Shelley, John Polidori, Claire Clairmont, and various relatives and hangers-on. It is, in many ways, a familiar story, as the sad saga of Byron and Company, and their celebrated 1816 sojourn at the Villa Diodati in Switzerland, has been recounted in numerous non-fiction books and novels (including *Frankenstein Unbound* by Brian Aldiss and the Paul West's *Lord Byron's Doctor*) and no less than three recent movies: *Gothic*, *Haunted Summer*, and *Routing with the Wind*. The Villa Diodati gang have practically become stock figures or archetypes (Percy the Dreamer, Byron the Cynic, Mary the Survivor, Claire the Frivolous, John the Misfit) and their story a modern myth of thwarted hubris, as what starts out as a defiant explosion of artistic/intellectual/sexual freedom and experimentation yields horrors both real and literary. Mary writes *Frankenstein*, Polidori writes "The Vampire" (an early precursor of *Dracula*), Byron's and Shelley's children die off, and everybody comes to a bad end. With this as its background, small wonder *The Stress of Her Regard* contains fewer heroes than it does real-life tragedies.

What Powers can and does do with this material is provide a typically ingenious (and convoluted) supernatural explanation for all the ills that befall these individuals, in the form of an initially-mysterious race of inhuman creatures that lavish their unwanted attentions upon the poets and their families. It should be noted that Kathryn Placsek did something similar with Keats, Byron and the Shelleys a few years back, but where her *In Silence Sealed* featured a more or less conventional vampirism, the "nephelin" of Powers's tale are a good deal stranger and more interesting. Sometimes resembling vampires, sometimes gorgons and sphinxes and other creatures of myth, they eventually turn out to be the secret source of all myths, who impose upon those artists that they select a vicious Faustian exchange: inspiration, and transcendent erotic experiences, at the cost of the lives of all those whom the mortal artist holds dear.

As a semi-antidote to the predestined tragedies of the genuine historical characters, Powers also works in a fictional hero and heroine: Michael Crawford, English obstetrician-turned-fugitive, and Josephine Carmody, a mentally-disturbed young woman with at least three different personalities. (The latter, by the way, is one of Powers's more memorable female characters—much better than the rather ordinary love interest in *On Stranger Tides*.) I say semi-antidote because, while these two do stand a chance of coming out alive, they hardly move unscathed through the nightmares surrounding them. Powers's characteristically rough treatment of his creations approaches self-parody here, as Michael and Josephine lose, respectively, a finger and an eye before the book is even a third over, with worse yet to come. . . .

Near the end of Chapter Ten, the question is raised as to whether

the presence of supernatural evil doesn't also imply the existence of a countervailing good. Michael Crawford, unlikely inhabitant of a notably horrific cosmos, thinks otherwise: "I'm afraid that the more absences there are, the more things are possible. And so if there's an absence the size of God, then there probably isn't *anything* so appalling that we can count on not meeting it." This is a sentiment worthy of H. P. Lovecraft, and one that accurately reflects the worldview of this book and Powers's work in general, and that would seem to place him firmly in the horror camp. Still, after marshalling all this historical and theoretical analysis, someone is bound to ask, "Yes, but is it scary?"

In other words, having identified the nature of the beast, how vigorous and effective a nightmare is it? Is it a good book?

About *On Stranger Tides*, I wrote last year that "Powers has worked an alchemical change upon the stuff of history . . . delivers chills and imagination." I praised his intricate plotting and "keen sense of the grotesque." The same applies to *The Stress of Her Regard*, and yet . . . there's also something rather cold and cramped about this new book. The first half, in particular, feels rushed and sketchy, as if Powers was straining to weld his carefully conceived fantasies to his meticulously researched historical chronology, and had neither the space nor the energy to bring the story fully to life. Characters and motivations seem vague and uncertain, all the more so because the mind and emotions of the human characters are frequently being manipulated by the shadowy nephelin, whose allure we must take on faith since their unearthly beauty and/or sensuality is assumed but not conveyed by the prose. The nephelin remain eerie, but distant, presences throughout the book. Also, for the first time in a Powers book, the fictional protagonist often appears overshadowed by and subordinate to the historical figures. This may be because the Romantics are more central to *The Stress of Her Regard* than Coleridge or Blackbeard were to, respectively, *The Anubis Gates* and *On Stranger Tides*. Admittedly, things improve in the latter chapters when Crawford finally makes his stand against the nephelin, but for most of the book he comes off as a convenient pawn and cipher: this poor jerk who, against his will, keeps getting yanked into the affairs of the poets.

I don't want to come down too hard on a book which I ultimately enjoyed (and which may help me win an ongoing debate with my ex-girlfriend); lesser Tim Powers is still quicker and more entertaining than most of today's horror or fantasy. Despite its genuine cleverness and occasional creepiness, though, I'll be surprised if *The Stress of Her Regard* is as well-received as Powers's earlier books. Not because it's the most horrific (though it is), but because it's the least involving. Maybe I've read too much about the Villa Diodati already. Maybe Powers is starting to repeat himself a bit. (Does protection against hostile magic always have to involve self-mutilation of some sort?) Or perhaps it's that, this time, the byzantine plotting and quasi-historical world-building has squeezed out too much character and emotion and atmosphere, leaving a notably bizarre skeleton which the reader is asked to flesh out on his or her own.

Atmosphere is particularly integral to horror fiction, along with bloodshed, demonic forces, and the presumption of a largely malign universe. *The Stress of Her Regard* has the latter elements in abundance, but is somewhat lacking in the former, perhaps because Powers was, despite all internal evidence, not fully intent of writing a novel of historical horror. In his earlier novels (ignoring *Dinner at Deviant's Palace* which is something of a mutant), atmosphere was supplanted by time-travel convolutions or buccaneering blood-and-thunder; in this book, his "purest," most Gothic novel, in which he travels to nothing less than the Villa Diodati and the roots of literary horror, the lack of mood is more readily apparent.

Historical horror is an underpopulated field these days, most modern horror writers preferring to follow the lead of Stephen King, Ira Levin, and others by setting their terrors in realistic, contemporary environments, with Anne Rice, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Kathryn Placsek, and Les Daniels being, along with Powers, the notable exceptions. Of this pack, Powers is arguably the most consistently imaginative and

original practitioner (maybe because of the obvious cross-pollination from science fiction and fantasy). Being more of a hybrid and less of a specialist, however, he's not quite as accomplished at creating a frightening atmosphere ("But is it scary?") as the others mentioned

above, especially Rice and Daniels. In the case of this book, it shows.

Like that spiritual absence that permits the existence of the nephew, there seems to be a stylistic absence here that keeps us from really feeling *The Stress of Her Regard*. ▴

### **Tower of Birds, [ed. anonymous]**

Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1989; \$5.95 pb, 398 pp.

reviewed by Thomas E. Jackson

Anyone who fell in love with Soviet science fiction through the Macmillan Publishing Company's "Best of Soviet SF" series must feel deprived these days. From 1978 to 1985, when the series apparently died, Macmillan offered good translations of carefully selected works, bringing fine books by authors such as Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Kir Bulychev, and Vadim Shefner to the American public.

Since 1985, American publishers have released virtually nothing by contemporary Soviet authors. (The honorable exception is the Strugatsky brothers' *The Time Wanderers*, brought out by Richardson and Steirman in 1987, although the publisher made reading the book unnecessarily difficult for readers and reviewers by not mentioning anywhere that it's a sequel to the Strugatskys' *Beetle in the Anisbill*.)

The only available new translations have been books brought out by the Russians themselves, many released by Raduga Publishers as part of its Adventure & Fantasy series. These books, generally only available through specialty outlets such as Chicago's Imported Publications, are generally less well translated than books in the Macmillan series. The best Russian-published books usually are classics such as *Engineer Garin and His Death Ray* by Alexei Tolstoy (written in 1926-1927) and Ivan Yefremov's *Andromeda* (published in 1959).

Unfortunately, publishers such as Raduga do a rather poor job of representing the USSR's contemporary scene. Because books published by Soviet presses such as Raduga are poorly distributed and draw meager royalties, All-Star writers such as the Strugatskys, not to mention major leaguers such as Shefner and Bulychev, are reserved for Western publishers, leaving Raduga with minor-league talents such as Vladimir Mikhanovsky and Yuri Medvedev. (Mikhanovsky's 1987 Raduga anthology, *The Doubles*, has a good short story, "The Land of Inferia," and three dull novellas; Medvedev's stories in *The Chariot of Time*, a 1988 Raduga product, are mostly distinguished by a swarthy nationalism which contrasts with the internationalism displayed by the better Soviet writers.)

*Tower of Birds*, Raduga's new anthology of stories by various

authors, breaks this losing streak with a lineup that includes stories by Viktor Kolupayev, Olga Larionova and Bulychev. It has a credible ratio of good stories vs. bad and is a pretty good sampler.

Some of these stories mix science fiction and fantasy elements in a way that is disconcerting to the American reader. In Boris Stern's "A Person Is . . ." (An Essential Addition to Asimov's Three Laws?) the protagonist flies around in a spaceship and is detained in a portion of the galaxy known as the Dump, filled with old automobiles and other detritus, and ruled by a Renegade Robot who thinks he is a human being. Interestingly, Stern's amusing little fable takes familiarity with Isaac Asimov for granted; the story doesn't explain who Asimov is and quotes only one of the three famous Laws of Robotics.

Several of these stories show a concern with ecology. In Sergei Drugala's "Every Tree Has Its Bird" and Vladimir Kantor's "The Toy Pistol," rapacious humans who disturb alien planets discover that the native ecology is sentient—and vengeful. In Mikhail Pukhov's "Counter Attack," we learn that whales serve as a kind of border patrol keeping terrible carnivores from reaching the ocean's surface. When whales are nearly killed off by man, the unguarded "sea monsters" devour passengers in ocean liners, crowds of sunbathers on beaches, etc. Pukhov's story is too ridiculous to be frightening—in one scene, the "entire crew" of a US aircraft carrier crowds into the ship's airplanes (p. 272)—but it's nice to see a Russian writer takes the side of the whales.

In a similar grisly undersea mold is Askold Yakubovskiy's "Mephisto." An oceanographer's son, Joe, is saved from a fatal disease by having his brain transplanted into a giant squid! Sure enough, the combination of a human brain and underwater brawn proves deadly and the son, rechristened Mephisto, thoughtfully keeps in touch with Dad using Morse Code transmitted through undersea cables as he becomes bigger and nastier. It's not a very good story, but Yakubovskiy carries the reader along with a certain grisly fascination as Mephisto munches on fish, crabs, dolphins, fishermen and so on and amuses himself by tipping over yachts and ocean liners. (It's no coincidence

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# Work in Progress

A Bibliographic Checklist of First Editions, by L. W. Currey

Draft: Revised 10/88

## WILLIAM GIBSON

b. 1948

BURNING CHROME. *New York: Arbor House, [1986].*

Boards. First printing has code 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 on copyright page.

COUNT ZERO. *London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1986.*

Boards. First published in Great Britain 1986... on copyright page. Note: Released 1 February 1986, prior to the Arbor House edition.

MONA LISA OVERDRIVE. *London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1988.*

Boards. First Published in Great Britain 1988... on copyright page.

NEUROMANCER. *New York: Ace Science Fiction Books, [1984].*

Wrappers. *Ace Original/July 1984* on copyright

page. *Ace Science Fiction 0-441-56956-0 (\$2.95).*

ALSO: *London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1984.* Boards. First published in Great Britain 1984... on copyright page. First hardcover edition.

ALSO: *West Bloomfield, Michigan: Phantasia Press, 1986.* Two issues, no priority: (A) White cloth, stamped in gold on spine and front cover; gold foil end sheets. 375 numbered copies signed by Gibson. In cloth slipcase; (B) White cloth, spine stamped in gold, front cover in blind; buff wove paper end sheets. Trade issue. First *Phantasia Press* edition on copyright page. First U.S. hardcover edition. Adds "Lo Tek: An Introduction" by Gibson.

Note: This is part of a series of bibliographic checklists of SF and fantasy writers that will update, revise, and expand the standard reference work *Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors* by L. W. Currey. For the organizational principles and methodology used in this and future lists, please refer to the introduction to that work. Knowledgeable persons are invited to communicate omissions and corrigenda directly to L. W. Currey, Elizabethtown, NY 12932.

## Tower of Birds review

(continued from page 22)

that Yakubovskiy's characters have western names. Mad scientists in Soviet of who bring ruin upon themselves and others usually live in capitalist countries.)

Many of the best stories in *Tower of Birds* deal with art and its utility to man. Vyacheslav Rybakov's "The Artist" is a realistic story set in prehistoric times. An artist who uses clay to draw animals on cave walls struggles to show the worth of his drawings to a clan preoccupied with killing a dangerous bear so it can occupy a bigger cave. Painter Yuri Katkov in Viktor Kotupayev's "Inspiration" thinks he has created a realistic depiction of a turning point in his life, when in World War II he and other half-starved boys met a quota for loading coal for transport. Yet everyone else who looks at the canvas sees a key moment in his or her own life. Katkov, who labored for years to depict adolescent boys covered with coal dust, innocently wonders why his wife says "Why are you painting about me?" or why his beautiful neighbor, Galina Lvovna, says "Who told you about it... And why on earth did you draw me like this?" Surely, Katkov thinks, his painting can't be that bad. . . .

Oлга Larionova's crew of aliens from the planet of Great Logitania in "The Planet With Nothing to Offer" are ruled by logic and science; they are cold to the arts and physical pleasures and can't imagine why they are wasting their time studying a barren planet—Earth of course, in classical Greece. One member of the crew, No. 27, is disguised as an Earth woman, in a computer-guided design which has eliminated all flaws in her face and body to make her inconspicuous. No one can figure out why the aborigines, particularly the men, keep staring at her. Larionova was the first woman in the Soviet Union to win the *Aelita*—an annual award for science fiction writers roughly equivalent to SFWA's Grand Master—and her story shows why. It uses sf elements to retell a classic Greek myth, which I can't identify without spoiling the ending.

The Larionova story was translated as "The Useless Planet" by Mirra Ginsburg in her 1970 anthology, *The Ultimate Threshold*, and a comparison of the two versions shows the limitations of Holly Smith, who translated the Raduga anthology. Smith apparently is accurate, and

the stories are in reasonably good English, but Smith sometimes settles for a literal translation rather than searching for a better English equivalent. At one point in the story a group of soldiers chase No. 27. She suddenly freezes still. In Ginsburg's version, the soldiers stare at her, cry out "Hecate!" and run away—a foreshadowing of how Larionova will use Greek myth to end her story. In Smith's version, the soldiers "rang out a word the Logitians had never heard before and did not understand: 'Gekata.'" (pp. 58-59). I'm sure Gekata is a good translation of the Russian word for Hecate, but most readers will be as baffled as poor No. 27. On fairness, I think Smith's title is more evocative than Ginsburg's.

I noticed similar but less important differences between Smith's version of Oleg Korabelnikov's title story "Tower of Birds" and Roger DeGaris's translation in *Earth and Elsewhere*, a 1985 MacMillan anthology. The story opens with six lines of poetry by Nikolai Zabolotsky; Smith preserves the rhyme in the Russian original, but DeGaris is more clear. In Smith's version, "landing force brigades" battle a forest fire in the story's first sentence; in DeGaris's translation, "airborne firefighters" rush to the scene. Again, inhabitants of Moscow know what a landing force brigade is, but airborne firefighter is more clear for the reader in Moscow, Idaho. But Smith's translation does convey the power of Korabelnikov's novella, which draws on Slavic folklore to convey the beauty of the Russian taiga. The native spirits of the forest convert the protagonist to a pro-ecology point of view which teaches him to see the forest and its inhabitants as a living whole; the story is reminiscent of Ursula K. Le Guin's "Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight." Both stories draw on myth and feature a human protagonist who survives a calamity—a forest fire in "Birds," an airplane crash in the Le Guin tale—and is rescued and tutored by the "natives."

Despite my mild reservations about Smith's translations, the 13 stories in "Tower of Birds" offer reasonable value and a glimpse at what the Russian writers are doing. The book has a pleasant, surrealistic cover illustration in color and like Raduga's other paperbacks is sturdy and well-made, with page numbers printed in a pleasing blue.

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It had begun as a relatively calm work weekend: everybody made the train according to plan; I spilled an entire pitcher of orange juice on David's kitchen floor; David's station wagon had been fishtailing badly in the rain; my husband, Jim Young, accidentally hurled a flaming marshmallow into Greg's lap; we discovered Moby Pusey (the great white cat-whale) on the cover of a forthcoming shared-world anthology; John had come down with the flu; Jim had managed to wrest my Express Mail package from the clutches of the Silver Spring Post Office; I discovered that one of my new technicolor contact lenses has a small rip in it; and Wynwood Press claimed to have finished copies of the latest Cramer/Hartwell collaborative anthology. Not perfect domestic tranquility, but close enough.

And then late Saturday night, after the NYRSF pesto and eggplant pun-feed (with basil obtained through connections in the State Department), the hard disk in David's remaining Mac SE started to crash and make quacking sounds—possessed, perhaps, by the ghost of Howard the Duck? David tried to exorcise this demon with the appropriate software, starting the machine up from a floppy. An evaluation of the disk revealed problems which appeared to be the kind that would be solved if we optimized the disk. So we clicked on the icon that told the program to optimize.

The Mac began again to quack. After ten or fifteen minutes of David, Gordon, Rob and me trying to coax it through its crisis, I called my father, John Cramer, in Seattle. He had a number of helpful suggestions, but also began to use words like "fatal."

For the lack of any better alternatives, we cancelled out of the optimization (which appeared to be going nowhere), and did another disk evaluation. It was like playing a slot machine. There were four little boxes on the screen. One by one, in three out of the four, icons of the Grim Reaper popped up, sickle and all. By appearances, the SE hard disk had cashed in its chips and gone home to that great Cyberspace in the sky.

It seemed likely that the disk needed to be replaced. It was certain that the contents of the hard disk were lost. About 70% of what was on David's hard disk was backed up on mine, and most of the magazine stuff for this issue was backed up onto floppies; we were certain to lose something, but if the gods smiled, it wouldn't be much.

More calls to Seattle. More helpful suggestions from Dad. Gordon and David both went to sleep. Rob and I stayed up trying to revive the corpse—partially out of commitment to the magazine, partially out of morbid fascination. After an hour and a half of fruitless attempts to reformat the disk, Rob and I gave up and went to sleep.

This morning I called Patrick Nielsen Hayden. He suggested sensible things like initializing the disk with the software that came with the SE, which I hadn't tried the night before. Attempts at initialization yielded messages involving damaged hardware and visits to authorized Apple dealers.

So, to a dear friend, *requiescat in pace*.

But the saga continues . . .

—Kathryn Cramer & the editors.

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